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THE FULL OF THE MOON

CAROLINE LOCKHART





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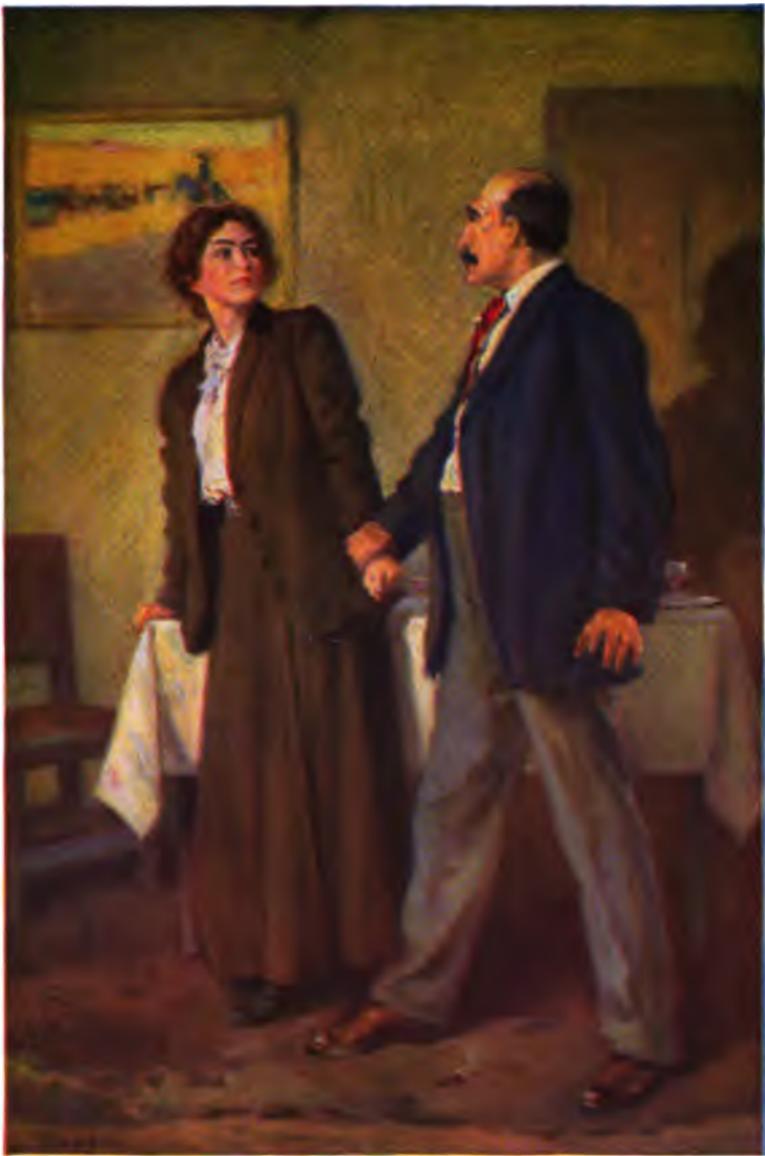
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"OH, IF THAT'S YOUR STYLE—"

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THE FULL OF THE MOON

BY

CAROLINE LOCKHART

AUTHOR OF "ME-SMITH," "THE LADY DOC," ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
CHARLES H. STEPHENS



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THE FULL OF THE MOON

CHAPTER I

NAN

“Mr. White is so anxious that you should have a class in the Sunday School, Nan, and I’d do it to please him. Of course after you are married he can’t expect you to give quite so much of your time to church work but at present there’s no reason why you can’t take them. They are nice little boys and they adore you.”

Mrs. Galbraith fastened a glove clasp and surveyed the result.

“*Nice* little boys!” exclaimed her daughter with heat. “They are little *devils*. Don’t I know them?”

“Nan!” reprovingly.

“Imps, then, if it sounds better, but I mean devils. They dropped limberger cheese in the radiator and not one of them ever knew

his Golden Text. They spent their collection money for drug-store candy and put a frog in my coat pocket. Besides," she squared her shoulders to launch her bomb, "I am not going to be married yet—I am not sure that I'm going to be married *at all.*"

"What do you mean, Nan?"

"Just what I say," defiantly. "I'm going to have my fling first."

Now that it was out, Nan Galbraith looked from one to the other of the family circle with complacency. Its members were fully dressed for church and the carriage had been waiting some time, but they dropped into various chairs at Nan's announcement, more or less aghast.

Nan pursed her lips and thrust out her chin as she adjusted her veil to a degree more of comfort, and waited for the storm to break.

It did not come immediately, so she repeated, "I mean it. I'm going to have my fling."

Nan's younger brother, a "prep" student, with all the candor characteristic of that self-assertive age of wisdom was the first to recover.

“Of course. The moon’s full,” he jeered. “It always works on your brain. We expect something queer.”

“But you are practically engaged to Bob!” Nan’s sister Elsie voiced the consternation of the family. “Every one is waiting for the announcement.”

“Let ‘em wait!” Nan tweaked at her veil and raised her chin aggressively. “I’ve told Bob.”

“And what does he say?”

The question was a chorus.

Nan shrugged her shoulders.

“Well, naturally—”

“Let me tell you one thing, Nan Galbraith,” broke in her brother hotly. “You’ll never get another such chance and you’d better grab it. I don’t want to hurt your feelings but you’re no ten-thousand-dollar beauty, Nan. If I could cruise off Labrador in my own yacht, and shoot over my own ground in North Carolina and go to Florida in my own car, I’ll bet I wouldn’t ask any girl with a turned-up nose to marry me.”

“He says he likes it,” Nan replied complacently.

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“Well,” indignantly, “I’m just telling you.”

“Telling me what you’ll miss if I don’t marry Bob. Anyway,” she demanded, “what has his money to do with it if I don’t care for him?”

“But you certainly have given him reason to think that you do.”

“Yes, mother, but I’m not sure, and I *want* to be sure. Anyhow, I want to have my fling in the way I want it.”

Mrs. Galbraith shuddered and reached two fingers up her sleeve for her handkerchief.

“And just what might your idea of a ‘fling’ be, Nan?” Her father’s voice was slightly ironical, yet his handsome eyes which Nan’s so strongly resembled twinkled the least bit in the world.

Nan colored a little and hesitated.

“I—I want to go out West—by myself—and have adventures and be independent and—”

“Suffragette!” gibed the “prep” brother. “Butt in to politics and make everybody hate you.”

“And meet a different kind of people from

those I've always known," she went on eagerly. "I want to see something of another life than this humdrum existence of teas and dinners, charity bazaars and hospital board meetings, slum children's picnics and high-brow concerts. I'm just bored to death with it!"

"Don't you ride at the horse-show, and belong to the Pine-tree Hunt, and risk your neck jumping wire! Isn't that enough excitement for any nice girl?" inquired Elsie indignant.

"It's the only thing that has kept me alive in this miserable, narrow rut we live in."

"How can you call us narrow when we have let you ride cross-saddle and make us all conspicuous. I never had thought to live"—Mrs. Galbraith's chin trembled—"to see a daughter of mine in trousers! I've suffered and said nothing. You haven't had the faintest idea how it has distressed me. We've humored you and now this impossible escapade which you suggest is our reward. If you carry it out, Nan, you will be the first of our family to bring a blush to our cheeks!"

"You blushed when Grandfather Maitlack

married the sempstress," Nan reminded her coldly, rattling the family skeleton.

"She turned out—respectably," defended Mrs. Galbraith, taken somewhat aback.

"So will my adventure."

Mrs. Galbraith raised tearful eyes to her husband.

"Where does she get it? Certainly not from my side of the house, Eustace."

Mr. Galbraith looked guilty.

"Father ran away to Alaska and ate dog," reminded Nan.

"Wolf," corrected Mr. Galbraith hastily.

"Wolf, then, and made stews from his leather shoe-laces."

Mr. Galbraith checked a grin and said reprovingly:

"But you must remember, Nan, you are a girl—it's very different—there are some conventions you must observe."

"Conventions—conventions!" Nan cried impatiently. "I've heard nothing else all my life. I can't do anything I want to or know the people I want to or be what I want to because I'm Nan Galbraith and must ob-

serve the conventions. I—I'm stunted—that's what I am!"

"Stunted!" The "prep" brother rolled his eyes and Mr. Galbraith smiled in spite of himself.

"Any way," Nan continued determinedly, "I'm twenty-one now and thanks to grandmother I have money enough to do as I like."

Her father considered her gravely.

"Do you really mean, Nan, that you would do this thing against the wishes of your mother and myself?"

"I'm sorry to be horrid, father, but I positively have made up my mind. I've been dreaming about it and planning it a long, long time. I won't disgrace you, truly I won't, if you'll just trust me. You must give me credit for being frank. I'm not going to tie the sheets together and slide down or anything like that—I won't *sneak* away."

Mrs. Galbraith lifted her veil that she might weep without melting the chenille spots while Elsie ejaculated vehemently:

"Well, I should hope not! It's bad enough to have it whispered around, as no doubt it

is, that my sister is a little 'queer' without you doing a thing like that."

"And a fine example you are setting me," added the "prep" brother in an injured tone.

"Follow it, then," Nan retorted. "It might make a man of you. You'll never stand on your own pins as long as you can hang on to father."

"Don't wrangle, children," Mr. Galbraith interrupted decisively. "This is no time to discuss the matter and we are late for service as it is."

"You won't disown me, father?" persisted Nan, timidly, as they left the library together.

He hesitated, then his eyes grew kinder as he looked into her upturned face.

"No, I won't disown you, but such an escapade as you suggest would be a very great trial to your mother and me."

Throughout the service, gloom as of a funeral party hung over the pew in the fashionable church of which the Galbraith family were prominent and active members.

Yet, in their hearts, with the single exception of Nan's father, no one really believed

that Nan would carry out her impossible program. She always had been high-spirited and as unconventional as her environment would allow, but she never had disgraced them and this—this would be little short of disgrace.

But Mr. Galbraith, now a solid, staid, and highly successful man of affairs, urbane of manner, fastidious as to dress, and of discriminating tastes, understood Nan's feeling of restlessness far better than she suspected, for had not the wanderlust taken him to Alaska—to eat wolf—when exactly her age? And in all things she was very like him.

He could not approve nor give his consent. It was not to be considered, of course, but he sympathized secretly, and he sighed unconsciously as he silently wished that his smug son had a little more of her spirit.

His mind wandered from the sermon to his daughter, and he turned his head slightly that he might look at her out of the corner of his eye, to find that she was regarding him in the same manner. They exchanged the smile of affectionate comradeship which they kept exclusively for each other.

“I suppose,” said the “prep” brother, sarcastically, reintroducing at the dinner table the subject which had been taboo all day for the sake of Sabbath peace, “that you’ll meet your affinity in the West.”

“One never can tell.”

“I suppose you’d even marry him if the moon happened to be full when he asked you?”

“To be sure,” Nan replied serenely, “if he asked me.”

“How would you like to walk down the church aisle beside your son-in-law in ‘chaps’, mother?” inquired the “prep” brother maliciously.

“Chaps?”

“Those woolly things cowboys wear on their legs.”

“Oh—cowboys! Yes, your father met one once in London.”

“An American showman, my dear.”

“He slapped you on the back, Eustace.”

“He prodded me in the ribs,” corrected Mr. Galbraith, dryly, “with his thumb.”

“Anyway, his familiarity was odious.”

“And your son-in-law,” continued Nan’s

brother, "will wear his hat in the house and sleep in his boots and——"

Elsie chimed in—

"When he's excited he will always explain that he's 'plumb locoed' and announce his departure by saying that he's 'got to hit the grit'—they never fail to say that in books.

"And after he's had a drop too much in town he'll come out and saddle one of the carriage horses. Then he'll chase the jerseys over the lawn swinging the clothes-line. We-ee-ough! we-ee-ough!"

"I'll tell you one thing right now," Nan turned upon her tormenter with heat. "'If I want to marry a cowboy I'll do it! I mean to marry to please myself."

"Why not the coachman? He's quite picturesque in his stable clothes and besides, his first name is Rupert, even if his last name is Higgins."

"Hush," Mrs. Galbraith's tone was peremptory, "I think your humor is in exceedingly bad taste."

Robert Ellison stooped to stroke the glossy neck of his favorite hunter and did his utmost

to inject a casual note into his voice as he asked:

“When is it you start, Nan, on this adventure of yours?”

Nan touched the dainty ear-tips of her “blue ribboner” with her riding crop and endeavored to reply with equal nonchalance.

“The day after to-morrow.”

“And you won’t consider letting me hover in the vicinity at a protecting distance?”

“Oh, no,” she refused quickly. “That would spoil it, and besides, anything of the sort really would make people talk.”

“I suppose so,” he admitted ruefully. “But, Nan”—he turned to her earnestly—“will you promise me one thing? Will you promise that if you need some one, if things don’t turn out just as you anticipate, if the people you meet do not prove to be exactly what they seem, if anything at all goes wrong, you will let me know? Will you send me word at once?”

“Yes, Bob, I’ll promise that.”

“There’s one thing, Nan.” He looked at her approvingly with his grave, gray eyes. “No person with an atom of intelligence

could mistake you for anything but a lady. That is a protection anywhere."

Nan smiled her appreciation.

"Nor could you the less readily be mistaken for anything but a gentleman."

He laughed in turn.

"Since we think so highly of each other, Nan, why is it that—well, that you insist upon taking this trip alone? I'm ready to go in any capacity from courier to a mere husband."

"I've tried to explain that to the family," said Nan soberly, "but they think I am perfectly silly and won't see my point of view at all. It's just that I want to be sure of myself, and I know you so well and like you so much that I'm not sure the feeling I have for you isn't only friendship. I want to know another kind of men from those I have met in my comparatively brief social experience, so that when I finally marry, the man will be the man I have chosen intelligently from among any other men who may have thought well enough of me to ask me to marry them. I like an active man, a man who is doing something in the world, making his

own way," she concluded vaguely, "or something like that."

"And you think I'm an unambitious idler"—his color had risen slightly—"that I haven't aggression and—well, the manly, fighting qualities which would attract a girl like you!"

"Oh, I didn't mean to imply that," Nan answered quickly, feeling that she had hurt him. "I wasn't personal—I was just talking," and she laughed, "to hear myself."

"I know," he nodded ruefully, and added, "It's a fact, though, that I don't do much but amuse myself. But what am I to do, Nan?" he pleaded half humorously, half in earnest. "I don't want to reform anybody so I wouldn't get anywhere in politics, and besides I'm not keen on strange bedfellows. There isn't any reason why I should make more money, because with my simple tastes it taxes my ingenuity to spend what I have, and you won't help me. Philanthropy would make a cynic of me in a week, for I have discovered there's nothing like dispensing charity to wreck one's faith in human nature."

“You could practice law. What was the use of studying it if you don’t practice?”

“To protect myself from other lawyers. Yes,” with mock gravity, “I could join the noble army of ambulance chasers.”

“Nonsense! You don’t have to be an ambulance chaser. You could be at the top if only you were in earnest.”

“Thank you, Nan, for those few kind words,” he bowed in exaggerated appreciation, “but I’m afraid the only thing in which I am in deadly earnest is my desire to induce you to marry me or to let me marry you—as you like—I’m very humble. Last summer, as you know, I went to Newfoundland and spent three wretched weeks camping on the Humber River, fighting mosquitoes and waiting for the mail to bring me a letter from you, and trying to forget you; but just as soon as the mosquitoes let up a minute I was loving you harder than ever. Most humiliating experience of my life, I assure you, for it convinced me that I have no will-power. In the end I gave in and went down to the Jersey coast where the mosquitoes at least fight according to the rules of civilized warfare, and gave my-

self up to the sensation of being hopelessly in love. I see plainly that I am a weak character and a poor Worm."

"It's good of you, Bob," said Nan gratefully, "to be so terribly decent about this outbreak of mine. It's comforting to find some one who can take it philosophically. It's made an awful row at home. I'm regarded as little short of a criminal—the 'wild 'un' of the flock.

"I am tremendously fond of my family, individually. They are dears. Collectively, they are a formidable, terrifying lot, and they are all lined up against me in this, to a man.

"They impress it upon me that I am breaking my mother's heart, bringing my father's gray hairs in sorrow to the grave, making my only sister a target for the finger of scorn and ruining her prospects, setting my young brother a ruinous example. I'm a bad lot! I'm all the erring daughters since the world began, rolled into one. And the queer part of it is, the more they oppose me, the more determined I am to carry out my program.

"I know I'm heartless, disobedient, ungrateful, a serpent they've warmed in their

bosoms, and it doesn't budge me. I'm going to do what I want to do just once in my life if I never do it again. Ever since I was born I've been doing mostly what some one else wanted me to do. Now I'm going to do what I want to do, if I hang for it!"

"You'll only get a life sentence, Nan, women are seldom hanged."

"The wildest adventure I ever had was the time Sancho ran away with the pony cart and spilled us off the bridge," she added resentfully.

"It's shameful the way you've been sheltered and protected" Bob declared. "It makes my blood boil."

"Don't laugh at me" she pleaded "or I'll feel that I can't even talk to you."

"I'm not, Nan. It's only that I'm such a wag that I have to be funny even when I'm sad. But tell me where do you get this adventurous streak of yours?" his eyes twinkled. "Surely not from your mother?"

"No, not from mother," Nan answered drolly "from father. I'm exactly like father—before he tamed down—only he won't admit it."

"It may be the best thing for you in the end—like being allowed to smoke a cigar when you were a youngster or eat too many cookies or raisins on the principle that a surfeit cures. Anyway there's my hand, and you can count on me."

She took it and looked him in the eyes with a boy's frankness while he continued:

"And whether you come back in one month or twelve, you'll find me waiting and loving you just the same. Will you remember that, Nan—just the same!"

"I'll remember. And Bob," with a little catch in her voice, "you surely are white folks!"

Flinging aside the magazine which had not been able to hold her attention, Nan raised herself from the depths of the great arm-chair in her little sitting-room and trailed a yellow silk negligee to the window.

"Only one night more, thank goodness!" she said aloud, "I feel like a matricide and a patricide, and all the other 'cides there are, with mother and Elsie bursting into tears every time they see me. They simply cannot

understand my point of view at all. Father does, I believe, though he wouldn't let me know it for the world.

"I wonder if I am making a mistake? I wonder if they are right and I am wrong? I wonder if I shall be sorry? Sometimes I am afraid."

Nan suggested a yellow bird in a golden cage or a topaz in a jewel case of its own color as she moved restlessly about the room.

There was a hint of yellow in her golden-brown eyes, her brown hair was streaked with sunny tints, and she dressed oftenest in varying shades of yellow and brown. Her friends called her sometimes "The Golden Girl," and the name, as her clothes, became her.

She was not beautiful, this Golden Girl, but as Robert Ellison had said, she was unmistakably a lady. She had a certain self-effacing dignity of manner which only partially concealed an unusually high spirit, vivacity, and a keen interest in life.

She was slim and erect. One felt instinctively the suppleness and strength of her young body under its covering of clinging silk and lace cascades.

She was wholesome. She radiated health and spirit. Her tawny, luminous eyes showed the imaginative mind, the romantic tendencies of her nature, and often there was in them a kind of inquiring eagerness which was like a child's.

She had a distinctive personality, too strong ever to be effaced, and, modest to a degree as was her dress, she could not have been inconspicuous, for Nan Galbraith in her way was a personage, and looked it.

The bystanders felt something of this fact when, a week later, the collarless landlord of the dove hotel in the little hybrid town of Hopedale, close to the Mexican border, reached up a pair of mighty arms and swung Nan to the ground from the driver's seat of the four-horse stage which ended its fifty-mile journey in front of his caravansary.

CHAPTER II

HOPEDALE

THE sun, shining through the tiny window panes, awakened Nan the next morning, and its brightness seemed a good omen. It thrilled her; she gave a squirm of contentment upon the hard pillows of the best bed in the best room of the Palace Hotel.

She never had awakened in a room in the least like it, and the noseless water-pitcher, the faded ingrain carpet, the pine chair repaired with baling wire, the hotel hair-brush chained safely to the wall, all were novelties which evoked from Nan a girlish giggle of amusement.

She was alive to the finger-tips with eager interest and anticipation, and she sprang out with an animation which she had not felt in months.

At the lowered window she filled her lungs with the sweet, piñon-scented air, and began to sing bubbling notes without a tune like those of the water-ousel in early spring.

She dressed quickly and stepped into the sunshine-flooded court of the one-story adobe hotel. It was to her romantic, youthful mind, like stepping into a new life in another world which was to be as interesting as the development of chapters in a book, with a dénouement which none could guess.

If Nan was interested in Hopedale, Hopedale reciprocated with a fervency which was little short of feverish. On the surface there was nothing to indicate the quivering curiosity of its inhabitants, and Nan could not know when she passed through the office on her way to the dining-room, that each casual lounging was a human interrogation point.

Nothing feminine in the least resembling Nan ever had appeared in Hopedale, and her social status, her excuse for being there, had been argued pro and con far into the night.

One of three reasons accounted for the few American women who came to this straggling adobe village fifty miles from the terminus of a branch railroad, and these reasons were, namely—relatives in the vicinity, deluded notions concerning Hopedale as a fertile field for canvassing for something, or the quite

frank purpose of a temporary sojourn at Doña Marianna's dance-hall.

The dining-room, which was empty when she entered, began to fill with suspicious rapidity, and the landlord, with a diamond shirt-stud glittering in his rumpled bosom, appeared in the doorway and looked hard from one late-comer to the other.

"Looks like you all overslept yourself this mornin'," he said, significantly.

To a man, the boarders cast furtive glances at Nan and grinned sheepishly.

"That cyanide what you passes over the bar makes a man sleep as if he was dead," came the retort finally from a rash youth at whom every one stared for daring to raise his voice above a whisper.

"Ling," shouted the landlord, "quit your millin' around and git here with this lady's grub." He spoke to a panic-stricken Chinaman. Then, clearing his throat and inhaling a breath which placed a strain upon his shirt-studs, he inquired:

"What might I call your name, Miss? My name is Poth—Fritz Poth."

Taken somewhat aback, Nan hesitated,

then, raising her smiling eyes to the landlord's expectant face, she replied:

“Galbraith—Miss Galbraith.”

Mr. Poth promptly scraped one toe around the other heel in a low bow and said heartily:

“Proud to know you, ma'am, and welcome to our city!”

The landlord's ease and unexpected knowledge of social forms filled his guests with surprise and envy. Not content with his triumph, Mr. Poth waved a jeweled hand toward a gray-bearded, mild-looking man at the end of the long table and continued:

“I'll make you acquainted with 'Old Man' Fitzpatrick.”

“Old Man” Fitzpatrick had just bitten off a sizable piece of bread, and there was one agonized second in which he was undecided whether to remove it or to risk strangulation and swallow it whole.

There was a general feeling of relief when he compromised by thrusting it into his cheek, where, though protruding like a squirrel's pouch, it enabled him to articulate.

“How air you?” he inquired affably while

a bright red rose above his beard and spread over his forehead.

“Like t’make you acquainted with ‘Sour-Dough Sam’.” Again the landlord waved his jeweled hand.

In response, a red-haired man sprang like a shot from his chair and executed a bow in imitation of Mr. Poth’s.

“Much obliged to meet you,” he said heartily; then, turning upon Mr. Poth he demanded fiercely:

“What you introducin’ me as ‘Sour-Dough Sam’ for? Maybe you think I ain’t got no reg’lar name?”

The landlord returned calmly:

“Never heerd of none.”

“McCaffrey’s my name—McCaffrey—and don’t you forget it!”

Mr. McCaffrey sat down hard, breathing heavily, and jerked at his plate, which had stuck to the red tablecloth. He used considerable energy, thereby making a kind of tent of the tablecloth which upset the pitcher of well-watered condensed milk.

“Serves you right, Mr. Caffrey,” said the

landlord with elaborate sarcasm, "for gittin' on the prod about nothin'!"

He returned to the bar in obvious disgust at the result of his efforts to promote sociability among his guests.

When Nan had breakfasted, Mr. Poth indicated a bench which he had placed in the shade of a wide-spreading cottonwood-tree that grew in front of the hotel.

"Thought you might like to set out and sun yourself," suggested Mr. Poth, and Nan thanked him as she sat down and leaned her back against the tree, quite unconscious of the eyes at every window in the vicinity.

Humming contentedly as she kept time to the rhythm with the toe of one small, perfectly shod foot, she did not hear Mr. McCaffrey scuffling noisily in the doorway behind her.

His efforts to attract her attention proving futile, he strained himself in a cough of great violence, and then affected a start of surprise when she turned and commented sympathetically upon his cold.

His cough ceased immediately and he stepped down briskly and seated himself beside her.

“That feller ‘Sour-Dough’s’ gall must ‘a’ broke and run all over him,” said the barber enviously as he left a lathered customer in the chair and walked to the door where he wiped his razor on the door-jamb and listened to the conversation with an interest which he made no effort to conceal.

“Went up in the range last week and forgot my blankets,” explained Mr. McCaffrey. “Slept ‘longside a rock all night and near froze. Rassleled a silver-tip about two years ago—he near et me—and I can’t stand up ag’in’ things like I onct could.”

“He’s talkin’ personal about himself,” reported the barber in a loud whisper over his shoulder.

Nan’s eyes opened.

“You fought a bear?”

“Yep.” Mr. McCaffrey’s tone was casual and disinterested. He felt he was losing valuable time. “Aim to stay in this country long?”

“I can’t say yet.”

“Waitin’ f’r relatives to come and git you, I reckon?” ventured Mr. McCaffrey.

"No. I have no relatives or acquaintances here."

"Well, well," said Mr. McCaffrey compassionately, "that's too bad."

After a proper pause he ventured again, while the barber elongated his neck something like a foot over the sidewalk to catch her answer.

"Canvassin', I suppose?"

"What?"

"Peddlin'—a sellin' of ha'r-ile, 'Liniment fer Man and Beast,' 'A Hundred Ch'ice Selections,' 'Hist'ry of the World' for five dollars down!"

Nan kept her face sober with difficulty.

"Oh, no, nothing like that."

"Must say," declared Mr. McCaffrey gallantly, "you don't look like ary book-agent what ever buncoed me."

The barber turned his head so far over his shoulder that he appeared to be performing the impossible feat of looking at the back of his neck as he reported to the restless customer in the chair:

"He ain't makin' no headway at all."

"You say you don't aim to make much of a

stay?" inquired Mr. McCaffrey, affecting a large yawn of nonchalance.

"My plans are very indefinite."

"Well, well." His voice vibrated with sympathy, though Mr. McCaffrey was merely sparring for time.

There really seemed no alternative but to believe that her presence was due to the third reason which accounted for strange young women in Hopedale, yet everything about Nan forbade the familiar inquiry as to whether she was "headed for Doña Marianna's place."

Mr. McCaffrey could not remember when he had felt himself so baffled, so puzzled, so utterly at sea as he now found himself by her non-committal answers.

He had an uneasy feeling, too, that he had not been nearly so subtle as he had intended. A mischievous sparkle in Nan's eyes gave rise to the thought, and his large ears reddened perceptibly as the impression grew.

"My skin'll crack wide open if you leave this here soap-suds on it much longer," came plaintively from the barber-chair.

"It's the uncommon feelin' of water on you face what hurts you," retorted the barber as he left the doorway with reluctance and began making reckless slashes at his victim's neck in a fashion which threatened his Adam's apple.

The loungers dangling their legs from the high platform in front of the general merchandise store across the street, who had focused their attention with disconcerting steadiness upon Mr. McCaffrey from the time he had seated himself beside Nan, began to grow restless as half an hour passed and he made no motion of leaving.

Any intelligent person could learn a lady's business in half that time, and it looked to them as though "Sour-Dough" was maliciously prolonging their suspense.

So they beckoned him, slyly at first, then more openly as they saw he meant to ignore their signs. It was Nan who finally called his attention to their signals.

"They seem to want you," she suggested.
"It's nothin' very pressin'," Mr. McCaffrey answered sourly. "Waitin' is their reg'lar business."

He felt piqued, outwitted. If it could be said that Mr. McCaffrey had an occupation it was that of collecting and gratuitously distributing news. He was the Associated Press of Hopedale, and whosoever fell a victim to his adroit questioning was apt to give up the inmost secrets of his soul.

“Ain’t your pumps workin’ good, ‘Sour-Dough’?” came from across the street.

Mr. McCaffrey felt it unwise to ignore their importunities longer lest they embarrass him by some loud personal allusion, so he arose in leisurely fashion and said in a voice which he hoped would carry across the street:

“Well, s’long, Miss Galbraith—I’ll see you later.”

He looked coldly into the row of eager faces and demanded:

“Ain’t you fellers no manners?”

“Who is she? Where did she come from? Where’s she goin’?”

“What do you take me for?” Mr. McCaffrey inquired haughtily. “Do you think I’d set down and ask a strange lady a lot of private questions about herself? Maybe you don’t know it, but I been well raised.”

“You got turned down, I see” said “Old Man” Fitzpatrick with composure.

“Think so?” Mr. McCaffrey laughed sarcastically. “Maybe I did ha, ha! Say,” indignantly, “don’t you old Grannies know me well enough to know I wouldn’t vi’late no lady’s confidence—high *or* low? But,” relenting a little, “I don’t mind goin’ so fur as to say she ain’t canvassin’.”

“Shoo, now”—“Old Man” Fitzpatrick’s voice was full of mock disappointment—“I was aimin’ to buy four bits’ worth of her complexion perperation what would leave my skin just like a baby’s.”

By mid-day Nan had become one of the most fascinating mysteries which it had ever devolved upon the sidewalk Solons to solve.

It was Saturday and pay-day in the adjoining mining camps, so Nan spent nearly the entire morning on the bench watching the picturesque stream of life flowing through the main street of the town.

Mexicans from the placers jogged in on their half-starved horses; cowboys from distant ranges came whooping in with a clatter of hoofs and a whirl of dust; footsore pros-

pectors turned their pack-burros loose in the streets and made a bee-line for the nearest bar, and later the men in overalls from the ore-mills came to swell the Saturday night throng.

Mr. Poth hung a conspicuous sign on the outside of his hotel which read:

REGULAR MEAL - - - - .75
REGULAR GORGE - - - -\$1.50

But the event of the day to Nan occurred at noon while Mr. Poth was ringing his dinner-bell in the middle of the street that all Hopedale might know his meals were ready on schedule time.

A girl on horseback, with a man riding beside her, turned the corner sharply at a brisk gallop. Their horses shied, reared, cavorted at the noise of the clanging bell. But the faces of their riders did not change expression; they appeared not even to be aware of the plunging of their horses.

The girl was dressed in divided skirts of faded black calico, and her shirt-waist parted company with her skirt-band untidily. Her gaudy, flowered hat was awry and Nan gave her only a passing glance. Her eyes remained upon the man who rode by her side.

He sat his horse with the cowboy's careless grace, half slouching over the horn of his Gallup saddle, his broad shoulders swaying with the motion of the horse, while the confidence of physical strength showed in every line and movement.

He had a square jaw, a straight mouth, and level blue eyes framed in the blackest of lashes. He had pushed his wide-brimmed hat carelessly to the back of his head, and a forehead as white as a woman's showed in curious contrast above his tanned face.

A certain keenness of expression, of comprehension, of the habit of concentration which a trained mind gives, was lacking, but his face denoted frankness and honesty to a marked degree.

His flannel shirt, the silk handkerchief knotted loosely about his neck, the fringed leather chaps showing service, the high,

carved leather cuffs, made up a picturesque ensemble, and a strange flutter of excitement crept over Nan as their eyes met.

He turned in his saddle after they had passed and continued to look at her in a stare which, though steady and long, had nothing of impertinence in it, while Nan with rising color suddenly realized that she had returned it as frankly.

The girl in the faded skirt and gaudy hat looked neither at Nan nor at the bystanders who lined the street. She seemed to have eyes only for the man who rode beside her.

“Who is that?”

“Edith Blakely from over to the Longhorn *bosque*. A looker, ain’t she?”

“She rides well,—and the man?”

“Why, that’s Ben Evans; foreman of the L. X. outfit.”

“Ben Evans.” Once more she felt that curious thrill of excitement and wondered at it, while simultaneously from some obscure niche in her brain there came the recollection of her brother’s gibe—

“I suppose you’ll find your affinity out West—in ‘chaps’.”

CHAPTER III

THE FOREMAN OF THE L.X.

“Now what for an outfit’s that!”

Mr. Poth’s disparaging voice in the doorway caused Nan to lift her eyes from the magazine she was reading in the shade of the cottonwood, which had become her favorite seat during the week that had elapsed since her arrival in Hopedale, to look at a prairie schooner drawn by a thin gray horse and a little mule which was crawling up the street. The wagon had been mended often with baling wire and the harness was a patch-work of ropes, chains, and leather straps. A dusty, sun-blistered boy in an orange sweater pulled the wagon to a standstill in front of the hotel and inquired:

“Ary place about here we-all can camp?”

“T’other side of the Merchantile Emporium air a pop’lar place,” Poth responded hospitably.

“Ary opery-house here?”

“Think you’re strikin’ a one-horse town?” inquired Mr. Poth with asperity.

“We-all are a troupe”—he seemed to force bravado into his boyish voice—“and we’re all right people, too. We belong to Frohman’s company over at New York, but the season’s closed and we’re doin’ this for our health.”

“Twon’t be good for your health if you’re as bum as the last Frohman troupe what showed here,” responded Mr. Poth candidly. “Air you comedy or tragedy?”

“We runs the gamut.”

“Oh, acrobats! Well, they takes pretty well here. I leases the op’ry-house; so you can come around and see me after you make camp.”

As the boy lifted the lines a hollow cough came from the interior of the wagon and a look of disapproval came over the landlord’s face.

“Lunger,” he said laconically.

The turn of the wagon disclosed through the opening in the rear, a tall young man, gaunt to emaciation, while, lying in the bottom, sound asleep with her head on a bag of

corn, was a girl of sixteen whose travel-stained and sunburnt face wore a look of utter weariness.

“Do you reckon that’s Violer Allen in there?” Mr. Poth’s voice had a sarcastic edge. He added confidentially: “If this here gamut they aims to run ain’t all they crack it up to be, they’re takin’ long chances showin’ in Hopedale. The town’s still feelin’ tolerable peeved over the six bits they was buncoid out of by the last All-Star Troupe. Julia Marlowe and her pardner lit out between two suns, but I got Lillian Bussel’s trunk—they wan’t anything in it only two bricks wrapped up in a petticoat. I orter made ‘em pay in advance.”

“But the audience wouldn’t really *do* anything to these people if it didn’t like them, would it?”

“Don’t know as it would lynch ‘em,” admitted Poth, “and aigs, even spiled ones, is too scarce to waste. But they’s turnips and this town never were stingy with the vegetables onct it set out to break up a show.”

It was again Saturday, and every Saturday was a gala day, as Nan had learned, and

as was evidenced by the clean shirts and increased business of the bar.

Mandolins tinkled gaily, and there was the hum of many voices in the street. The sweet scent of burning piñon filled the air like an incense-permeated cathedral and the dark-blue threads of smoke rose straight to the turquoise sky.

Nan's magazine lay in her lap while she looked on dreamily at the kaleidoscopic scene, yet it might have been observed that she turned her head quickly at the sound of galloping hoofs and scanned the face of each new rider with a certain intentness.

An incident of the afternoon was the arrival of a four-wheeled cart which pounded up the street drawn by two galloping ponies. The man who held the lines plied a long switch ceaselessly and then pulled them sharply to their haunches in front of the hotel.

He called peremptorily to a Mexican to come and stand at their heads, and Nan noted that the Mexican scrambled to his feet with an alacrity which was noteworthy.

The driver sprang lightly over the wheel

and walked past her into the hotel without so much as a glance, and this too obvious lack of curiosity made Nan think that he was more conscious of her presence than had he stared at her with the frank interest to which she was becoming accustomed.

His indifference was too marked to be real, and Nan had a feeling that not only had he seen her without seeming to see, but also that he had heard of her and knew all of her that much persistent questioning had been able to extract, which she flattered herself was little.

She was not surprised when he came out again shortly, accompanied by Mr. Poth, whose face wore the strained, purposeful look which foretold some social effort on his part.

“Like to make you acquainted, Miss Galbraith, with the boss of the L.X. outfit. Shake hands with the Hon. ‘Hank’ T. Spiser.”

Nan found herself looking into a pair of hazel eyes curiously shot with streaks of green, the pupils of which were like tiny specks of pepper. His prominent nose was beak-like and his thin, upper lip lifted fre-

quently under a short, stiff mustache, to disclose two rows of strong, yellow teeth.

The conspicuous cleft in his square, hard chin seemed at variance with the rest of his face, which chiefly denoted arrogance.

In the cart he had seemed a tall man, but standing, his height was not much greater than Nan's own. He was of stocky build and inclined to corpulency, also he had a peculiar rolling walk not unlike a sailor's.

Now, as he acknowledged the landlord's introduction in a sweeping bow, the removal of his hat displayed a rather bald head upon which a few lengthy hairs were used to the greatest advantage.

"Poth tells me you've come to make a little stay in our country. Glad to hear it! If there's anything I can do for you—anything at all you want, lemme know." His manner of speech was abrupt, authoritative, wholly indicative of a man accustomed to obedience.

"You are very kind," Nan murmured formally.

"Now, don't hesitate," he urged. "We're rough out here, and style ain't our long suit,

but we aim to treat strangers right. Ain't that so, Poth?"

"Sure," with a heartiness which seemed somewhat forced.

As he sprang into the cart and lifted the lines over the backs of the dripping horses, he turned and asked:

"You'll be at the show to-night, I suppose?"

"Mrs. Poth has invited me." Something in his eyes, his voice, his manner subtly conveyed the impression that his appearance there was contingent upon her own.

Nan was not sure that she liked Mr. "Hank" Spiser, boss of the L. X. outfit. What was it he disseminated?—an impression of insincerity beneath his bluff hospitality, of an indefinable disrespect disguised by pretentious bows?

She, however, had not a strong belief in the theory of "first impressions" and dismissed her unfavorable opinion as hasty, but of one thing she was sure, and that was that her interest in the handsome and picturesque foreman of the L. X. outfit was far greater than in its more important manager.

Not for the world would Nan have admitted that this interest had anything to do with her acceptance of the shy little Mexican woman's invitation, or her choice of a frock for the evening's entertainment. And she tried to delude herself with the belief that her wish was merely to "look decent" upon her first public appearance in Hopedale, but in her heart she knew that the thought that Ben Evans might ride in from the ranch affected her decision when her choice lay between a plain shirtwaist and a particularly becoming blouse of filmy lingerie.

From the silence which fell when Nan and Poth's pretty Mexican wife took their seats in the already well-filled opera-house that evening, it is to be inferred that Nan had entirely succeeded in her desire to look "decent." In magazines and books they had seen girls who looked like Nan, and from the same source Nan had obtained her knowledge of audiences which looked like this one.

At the door of the opera-house Mr. Poth stood guard with a lantern under his arm, by the light of which he looked for plugged

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money among the silver which was flowing in an encouraging stream.

The kerosene lamps screwed to the sides of the long, unplastered hall, aided by tin reflectors, gleamed their brightest, while a fresh layer of sawdust upon the floor showed that Mr. Poth had been giving the opera-house his personal attention.

Nan found herself the cynosure of all eyes as she and Mrs. Poth searched for their names upon the slips of paper laid upon the seats of the pine chairs marked "Reserved." She glanced about and once more she felt the same strange agitation when her eyes met those of Ben Evans, who was leaning against the wall among a group of cowboys.

Of cowboys there were plenty in the motley crowd, a rim of white encircling their scalps in evidence of recent haircuts, while a powerful odor of cologne and Florida water emanated from their vicinity.

Swarthy Mexicans, lean, oily-haired, showed their white teeth frequently as they whispered together. Brawny miners and grizzled prospectors, the more dapper merchants of the town, the few women of Hope-

dale in antique fashions, and innumerable small boys dangling their thin legs from the window-sills made up the audience.

While Nan flashed occasional surreptitious glances at the foreman of the L.X. outfit, its manager in the seat behind her was studying her piquant profile with fascinated intentness.

He looked at her hair. The way it grew about her temples and close to her ears was adorable. In repose, her mouth was sensitive and soft and yielding; he noticed that, in a nervous trick she had of shutting her teeth hard upon her lower lip, the blood rushed back in a crimson flood as though it flowed swift and red in her veins.

She had an odd way, too, of suddenly throwing her head back with a little air of haughtiness and looking under her long lashes. There was something spirited in the mannerism which appealed mightily to that which was masterful in him. The speck of pepper in his hazel eyes dilated until it seemed almost a normal pupil.

The curtain of turkey-red calico which was stretched across the stage on wire and gave an air of mystery to the coming entertain-

ment, was a trifle late in parting, and the stamping of restless feet, catcalls and hisses, told Nan something of the temper of the audience which the traveling entertainers had to face.

It was apparent that Poth had been altogether correct in his surmise that the audience would be in no mood for leniency with the failure of the last "troupe" still rankling.

The performers themselves may have felt the unfriendly atmosphere, for, when at last the curtain parted, and the boy who had driven the wagon came out and announced a banjo solo by himself, his face wore a twisted, frightened smile.

The air was simple, but he stumbled badly in his nervousness, and when he bowed himself off it was amid a faint half-hearted round of applause which was little short of condemnation.

Beneath his brave assumption of ease Nan felt intuitively the young entertainer's discomfiture and humiliation at his failure to please, and her heart went out in quick sympathy to the strange trio and the ordeal before them.

Remembering Poth's vague threat, she felt a growing uneasiness as to their treatment if the remainder of the program was no better than the beginning.

A hollow cough, which came at intervals from somewhere in the rear of the curtained stage, now served as an announcement of the next entertainer's appearance. He came on with an attempt at jauntiness, the emaciated invalid of the afternoon, looking more pitifully gaunt than before in the clownish dress of a countryman.

A raucous voice from the rear of the room greeted him.

"Hello, Boneyards! When did they dig you up?"

The audience snickered, and Nan saw the startled flash of pain in his sunken eyes. His long fingers closed convulsively as he nerved himself to face them, and then, with a gulp of nervousness he began his monologue of ancient conundrums and jokes, not too skillfully revamped.

But far-fetched and venerable as they were they brought laughter and vociferous applause from the boisterous critics in front,

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and Nan breathed easier when she saw confidence growing in the pathetic humorist upon the stage.

His efforts were something to be endured, not enjoyed, by a person with a vestige of culture or taste, and she turned her head ever so slightly to note the effect upon Ben Evans. She experienced a kind of shock to see that he was following the crude humor and dreadful puns with the keenest enjoyment and she felt a vehement disgust, a secret shame for him when she observed that he evidenced his probation by kicking his heels against the mop-board. Imagine—well, Bob, for instance, kicking his heels against the mop-board! Nan turned her head from him abruptly. Her interest in him and the care with which she had dressed for the absurd entertainment suddenly made her seem ridiculous to herself.

Whatever hopes the reception of the monologue had raised as to the friendliness of the audience was quickly dispelled by its reception of the young girl's vocal solo.

It was bad, indescribably bad, but made worse by fright as she stood before the jeering crowd holding a sheet of music between

hands which shook with a violence that made the music useless.

She looked only a frightened, countrified child as she stood on the high platform in her frock of figured pink calico, scarcely ankle length, with its ruffles of cheap lace in the elbow sleeves and a string of glass beads for ornament.

The hoots from the rear of the hall grew louder as she lost the key, and sibilant sounds from all parts stung her nearly to tears as she tried shrilly for notes which, in her panic, she could not reach. Yet she stood her ground with something of a bantam's spirit. Nan could see the trembling of her knees beneath her skirts.

The howls increased, her plucky defiance seeming only to arouse further opposition and antagonism. Had they no pity? Could they not see the appeal in the child's eyes? This, then, was the chivalrous West! Nan's lips curled contemptuously and her cheeks burned with anger as clownish witticisms and coarse comments were bellowed from different parts of the house.

“Take that calf out to its maw!”

“Them top notes sound like a saw hittin’ a knot.”

“Fly away, birdie!”

“Aw, git off—git off!”

Occasionally a protesting voice cried:

“Let the kid alone!”

Nan glanced at Ben Evans. Was he too joining in the baiting of this panic-stricken child? Scarcely. There was a frown of disapproval upon his face, a gathering storm in his blue eyes. Nan nearly forgave him for his rustic pleasure in the monologue.

The rowdies concluded that more amusement could be extracted from that recognized form of recreation known as “breaking up a show” than from allowing it to proceed. The uproar became one long howl of derision, while the child stood with her face buried in the bend of her elbow—the defenseless target of the storm.

The gaunt humorist strode out with a brave semblance of authority and lifted a long, wax-like hand over the audience for silence. His face showed ghastly beneath its make-up, and he looked a grotesque corpse as he stood trying to make himself heard above the din.

"Just give us one more chance!" he pleaded.

The effort of shouting brought on a paroxysm of coughing, violent, tearing, racking his thin chest and swelling the veins in his temples.

"He's a lunger! put him out!" Voice after voice took up the brutal yell of protest. "No lungers wanted! Get off! Get out!" Then a turnip hit him full and hard in his sunken chest.

Involuntarily Nan sprang to her feet, and not knowing what she did, turned and faced the audience behind her, with her eyes flashing and her small, red mouth curved in scorn. Simultaneously there came a fierce yell of rage so savage in its intensity that it rang above the tumult of the rioting mob in the hall.

"Cut that out! By God, you-all cut that out!"

Nan saw Ben Evans kicking chairs out of his way and hurling aside the bystanders who blocked his path as he cleared an opening to the stage.

His hat was on, tilted to shade his eyes,

and the mouth and chin which showed beneath were hard and set. One hand rested significantly at his hip and, as he yelled again, a vibrating, taunting yell, he threw back a shoulder in a swaggering gesture of defiance.

“Now, you Montgomery Ward cowpunchers, you Jim-Crow miners, you yellow-back bad men from God knows where, if you-all want a target, try me! Take somebody of your size. Jest call out your names when you throw, if you’re men enough.”

He was a picture of reckless, personal courage, of consummate self-confidence as he bounded upon the stage and faced the bullies. Once more his voice rang out with all the challenging savagery of a Comanche war-cry:

“What’s the matter with you-all? Fire away, Greasers. If you got any more of that there ammunition—shoot it here! Don’t be bashful, Juan Ospino, jest because I’m lookin’ at you!”

His supporters were tumbling over chairs and benches to reach his side, not only ready but eager for the fray, and they made a group too formidable for the rowdies in the rear to

tackle as they stood belligerently waiting for the trouble to begin.

But there were no more turnips for the hollow-chested humorist, or for the now loudly weeping soloist on the stage, and no response to Ben Evans's urgent invitation to use his broad chest as a target.

However, it was plain enough that the "show" was done, that another of "Frohman's Troupes" was a failure. The irate manager of the opera-house was joining with the audience in their denunciation, which was demanding its admission money refunded at the door.

"They'll pay for the hall jest the same," Nan heard him declaring wrathfully. "I'll get it out'n 'em if I have to take their team and wagon."

Mr. Poth's softer side, it seemed, was not for traveling artists.

"You-all better drag it while things has simmered down," Ben was advising the entertainers, while Nan waited with Mrs. Poth for the hall to clear. "I'll see that you get out of town safe."

"We could a done better if they'd have let

us go on," sobbed the girl, "but we ain't been at it long and it makes us feel bad if they don't like us on the start. And what with long jumps and brother bein' sick and all we're pretty tired the first night."

"You was doin' good," declared Ben Evans. "W'ant she, boys?"

"It was fine," came a hearty chorus, and the earnest voice of Clarence Strunk, cook of the L.X. outfit, added: "Mrs. Bernhardt couldn't a done better."

Once more Ben Evans fixed upon Nan his frank stare of admiration as he and his supporters tramped past on their way out, and again Nan felt that curious quaver of excitement when their eyes met. The foreman of the L.X. outfit attracted her more than she cared to admit, and she wanted to know him with an eagerness of which she was ashamed.

CHAPTER IV

THE BOSS OF THE L.X.

"I LIKE spirit in women and horses," was a favorite aphorism with the Hon. "Hank" T. Spiser; but what he really meant was that he relished breaking it in either.

He had interpreted aright Nan's mannerism of suddenly elevating her chin, the quick sparkle of her eye, and his study of her piqued his interest mightily.

He saw the high spirit concealed beneath her self-effacing dignity, but that which a man like Spiser could not see, or, seeing, understand, was her nearly childlike innocence, her absolute purity of mind.

An habitué of dance-halls, a life-long associate of reckless women, they had come to form the standard by which he judged every woman who was not unequivocally accounted for by a husband.

Even then he considered few, if any, proof against his blandishments if he chose to persist, his unshakable theory being that married

women were virtuous only through fear of being found out.

Spiser's ideals were no higher than himself, and Spiser was merely a crafty, masterful brute.

Nan's clear eyes, her air of good breeding, her manner with its mixture of girlish candor and reserve, her conversation and dress, which bore every earmark of education and refinement, conveyed nothing to him beyond the fact that an unusual and uncommonly attractive young woman had arrived within his field of activities ready to walk into a properly constructed web.

She was unprotected, unattached, with no plausible excuse for being there, therefore she must of necessity be one with the women he knew best, though of an unquestionably superior and fascinating type.

It was all quite clear in Mr. Spiser's mind, yet he took the precaution to bring his spinster sister to call when next he came to the hotel for the purpose of advancing his acquaintance with Nan.

Spiser's sister was a faded, pale-eyed little woman, who had a way of accompanying

each utterance with a nervous, deprecatory gesture, as though she had formed the habit through the constant necessity of excuses and explanations.

Beside her forceful brother her personality was *nil*, and she had a peculiarly helpless fashion of glancing at him after each speech, as though to read his verdict upon it in his eyes.

Spiser exerted himself to the utmost to be agreeable, and Nan was self-reproachful as she thought of her first impression—her unfair prejudice.

Certainly, it was very nice of Mr. Spiser to bring his sister to see her, and Mr. Spiser, aglow with the feeling that he was making a favorable impression, had an inspiration upon which he at once acted.

“Me and my sister,” said Mr. Spiser, fumbling with the large gold nugget which dangled as a watch-fob from his waistcoat-pocket, “are plannin’ to go out to the ranch and spend a couple of weeks, and we thought it ud be a good chance for you to go along and see somethin’ of the country. No better scenery this side of Colorado than right there

at the L.X. ranch-house on the Esmeraldas. How'd you like it?"

Miss Spiser stared at her brother, while Fritz Poth, flicking flies from the window of the hotel office where Nan received her callers, gave him a mocking, sidelong glance which might have dampened the enthusiasm with which Nan accepted the invitation had she seen it.

"How very, very nice of you, Miss Spiser!" she cried at once, all eagerness, as she turned to that still dumfounded lady who, within her memory, had not been asked to join her brother on any jaunt for pleasure.

"I—we'd like it v-very much if you will come," she stammered, having been given her cue in a warning glance from his eyes.

"I know of no reason why I cannot," declared Nan, her eyes sparkling. "I've rather exhausted the rides about here and have read all the books and magazines Mr. Poth can borrow for me, so the prospect has looked a little dull. The one promise mother exacted from me was that I would not go prowling about the country unchaperoned, and this quite solves the problem, doesn't it?"

“Hank” Spiser’s heavy lids drooped in cynical amusement. They always had some romantic tale of strict and wealthy parents, convent educations, and that sort of thing. He had heard the same a hundred times before, but, if this was a part of her game he had to play up to it, so he agreed heartily.

“It would seem to,” he smiled. And continued magnanimously: “There’s a corral full of horses to ride, plenty of fresh beef, milk and eggs, and when I’m not there some of the cowpunchers will see that you are kept in firewood and anything else you may need.”

“You are too kind!” Nan was like a child in her glowing, unaffected animation. “This is the real Western hospitality of which I’ve heard. I’m so glad it’s not a myth as are so many delightful things when one comes to learn the truth about them.”

Fritz Poth gave Spiser a satirical look. Spiser moved uneasily in his chair, but waved his hand deprecatingly and declared:

“Oh, that’s nothin’—nothin’ at all. Don’t mention it again.”

“When shall we go?” Nan asked the

question of Miss Spiser, but her brother answered for her:

“You can pull your freight to-morrow if it’s agreeable to you.”

“Perfectly, if it suits your sister.”

Miss Spiser assented doubtfully.

“I’ll send a wagon for your trunks and drive you two out myself. Eh—Sis?”

Miss Spiser did not seem particularly responsive to his brotherly jocularity, though she nodded.

“To-morrow mornin’, then—at ten!”

“I’ll be ready—you may count on that!” Nan laughed joyously and the warm, glowing radiance of her face seemed to dazzle Spiser anew.

“Isn’t that lovely of Mr. Spiser and his sister?” Nan demanded, her voice bubbling with delight.

Mr. Poth was eying the former’s vanishing back with an expression not too friendly.

“Lively,” he responded dryly.

Nan looked at him in surprise.

“Don’t the grub suit you here, ma’am?” he inquired with a queer awkwardness of manner. And added enticingly: “I’ve been think-

in' of sendin' back East and gittin' me a kit of mackerel."

That was it, then—the prospect of losing a boarder was the cause of the genial landlord's lack of enthusiasm over the proposed visit. She hastened to assure him—

"I haven't a single complaint. You are all too kind; it's only that I want to see a real ranch—a big one like the L.X., and this seems like such an opportunity."

Mr. Poth said nothing further, but the sour expression of his face did not alter, and Nan felt sorry to have discovered in her amiable landlord this sordid trait.

A Mexican teamster, grumbling at being obliged to rush off at only twelve or fourteen hours' notice, arrived at eleven for Nan's trunk. A few minutes later Spiser himself rattled up in his cart.

"Sorry I'm late," he explained in apparent annoyance, "but I've been hangin' around for Mary and finally come off without her. You and me will go on ahead, because I've got some things out there on the ranch that's got to be tended to and I've arranged for her to start in an hour or so."

“Says she’s got to get her house in shape before she’ll start. Wonderful housekeeper—got to leave everything ‘just so’ or she’ll be in misery all the time she’s gone. Get your hat on and jump in.”

Nan hesitated.

“She’ll be along right enough—there’s her trunk in the wagon.”

When Nan turned to go back into the hotel Fritz Poth was staring hard at her with an expression so darkly disapproving that it startled her. She had a half-formed impulse to ask him if there was any reason why she should not go, but ignored it, and went on to her room. His attitude annoyed and vaguely disturbed her but she told herself as she pinned her hat that he was presumptuous; that her movements were certainly not Fritz Poth’s affair and she said good-bye to him, with a shade less friendliness in her manner. He responded curtly, glowering from the doorway as they drove off.

Spiser talked of the county and its people on the long drive to the ranch-house on the Esmeraldas in something of the manner of a feudal lord.

That he considered himself all-powerful, omnipotent almost, in this sparsely settled country was obvious from the tone of his conversation. And with some reason, Nan opined, judging from the obsequious salutations of the sullen Mexicans and half-breeds whom they passed, and the unwilling, yet half fearful nods of impecunious homesteaders who pulled to the side of the road to let him go by.

But why, even as manager of the largest ranch in the county, he should receive such consideration, grudging as it evidently was, Nan could not exactly understand.

His manner toward her was respect itself, yet she was conscious that he eyed her covertly when he thought himself unobserved —that not a change of expression escaped him, and that her lightest word had his entire attention.

This interest might have been considered flattering from a man like Spiser, yet Nan did not regard it so. Rather, she felt a growing uneasiness as the miles lengthened between herself and Hopedale, and there was

no glimpse of Miss Spiser on the various rises in the road behind them.

Noting her disquietude, which evidenced itself in turning frequently, he assured her that there was no cause for alarm.

“She’s always an hour or two after the fair,” he declared humorously, “but she’ll pike in by dark.”

“Supposing she shouldn’t; supposing something serious should happen to detain her?” Nan asked nervously.

“Well, what of it? Nothin’ or nobody would eat you.”

The long road over the mesa dropped abruptly into a gulch, in the bottom of which, where it widened into a small flat, was a cluster of adobe houses with a tiny general merchandise store rising in the center.

“The city of El Oro,” explained Spiser; “also my post-office.”

He drove to the high platform in front, and called.

A grizzled, deliberate old man came out finally with a handful of mail—the first individual, Nan thought, to make no undue haste when Spiser spoke.

“Miss Galbraith—Mr. MacNeil.”

The old man nodded carelessly without looking at her.

“If any mail is forwarded here for her, put it in with mine. She will be my guest for a time.”

“There’s mail here yet for your last-guest,” the old man answered in a tone of ill-concealed contempt, and he added with a touch of malice: “She left so sudden she didn’t give me no forwardin’ address.”

Spiser gave him a furious look but explained glibly enough to Nan: “A lady-friend of my sister’s that got homesick.”

The old post-master looked up in some surprise as though wondering why Spiser took the trouble to lie. Then for the first time he really looked at Nan.

Nan felt herself coloring under the scrutiny of his quizzical gray eyes, feeling exceedingly uncomfortable without knowing why.

“If you should get—homesick, too, Miss,” he said significantly and with a new respect in his voice, “why, don’t forget that I’m your nearest neighbor.”

Nan looked from one to the other wondering what it all meant.

“You talk too much, MacNeil, for a government official!” Spiser lifted the lines and brought the remnant of a whip down hard on the horse’s backs.

“I don’t talk enough—for a government official,” returned the old man quietly, and he looked at Nan.

“A meddlesome old fool! I’ve got to get his scalp.” Spiser did not feel it incumbent on him to explain that he already had tried, and had learned that the government appeared to think uncommonly well of “Old Man” MacNeil, as he was designated in the community.

The afternoon’s sun was waning when Spiser pulled the tired horses to a standstill on the edge of the mesa and, with the butt of his whip, pointed in real pride to the valley below.

“Ain’t that some picture?”

And indeed, after the long, dusty ride of the afternoon, it did look to Nan like 160 acres of paradise. A small stream ran like a silver ribbon along the emerald green of an alfalfa

field, while steep bluffs of red sandstone on either side of the valley reflected the glow of the setting sun.

The air which rose from the blossoming, freshly irrigated alfalfa field was cool and sweet, and involuntarily Nan gave an exclamation of delight at the beauty of the peaceful scene below her.

“Only drawback to me is its lonesomeness, but now”—Spiser looked steadily at Nan—“I won’t even have that complaint.”

The remark recalled her to herself and intensified the growing conviction that she ought not to be there. Her eyebrows contracted in a frown as she scanned the road behind her once more in search of the distant speck which would relieve her anxiety.

The grating of the brake upon the cart-wheel brought a group of cowpunchers to the door of the bunk-house to quite frankly stare as Spiser drove past the door to the square white cottage across the road on the bank of the stream.

“How are you, boys?” he said briefly, and they responded with equal brevity:

“How are you?”

Nowhere did Spiser's appearance seem to evoke enthusiasm. Nan was not thinking of this, but of the startled, even shocked look in Ben Evans's eyes when they rested upon her in recognition. There was no mistaking the surprise and disappointment they held.

Her voice and manner were strained and self-conscious when the cart stopped at the door of the cottage and Spiser raised his arms to help her out, while all the occupants of the bunk-house across the road looked on in silence.

Her trunk, along with a small papier-maché affair of Miss Spiser's, was on the porch. Perhaps in all her life Nan never had known a more uncomfortable moment than when Spiser opened the door of the guest-chamber and told her to make herself entirely at home.

“We'll have the cook bring supper over here,” said Spiser as he was going out.

Nan protested hastily:

“But I'd rather—much rather—have supper where the rest of them do!”

Her preference had no weight with him.

“I don't eat with my men when I can avoid it,” he returned curtly.

Some subtle change had come over Spiser which Nan was quick to feel—an added assurance, a satisfied manner which conveyed the impression that he was master of a situation entirely to his liking. Her uneasiness increased, as more and more keenly she realized the awkwardness of her position.

The stillness of the musty house added to her nervousness, though she tried to reassure herself with the thought that her fears would seem absurd enough when Miss Spiser arrived.

“You haven’t any sand at all,” she told her reflection in the mirror, “to get in such a state over the first unusual situation. You!—who were pining for adventure.”

“But I haven’t been pining for *this* kind,” the pale image answered back.

Shortly Nan heard the cook laying the table, but she did not leave her room until Spiser rapped upon her door and announced supper. Constrained to a degree under the inquisitive eyes of the cook, she took her seat at the table which was laid for two only, Spiser pushing her chair beneath her with a

great show of gallantry. He seemed curiously gay and elated, she thought.

Nan looked in annoyance at a wine-glass set conspicuously before her plate. Was it not possible for him to see that her position was sufficiently uncomfortable without that? She turned her glass with a little more vigor than necessary. That sparkle Spiser liked leaped into her eyes.

“What—no wine?”

Nan replied coldly:

“No wine.”

The cook glanced at her oddly as he placed platters upon the table.

“I’m sure you’ll change your mind,” Spiser replied, unruffled. “I always keep a little out here on the ranch for celebrations,” he added. “Clarence, fill Miss Galbraith’s glass.”

This time Nan’s eyes flashed unmistakably.

“Positively not,” and she lifted her small hand in a decided negative.

Spiser shrugged his shoulders.

“Suit yourself. That’ll be all, Clarence, we won’t want anything more to-night.”

“But your sister,” Nan looked at him

searchingly, "she will surely be here shortly—'

"Oh," he answered carelessly, "Clarence can get her up something if she comes."

"*If* she comes?"

The cook would have given much to have heard Spiser's answer to the sharp interrogation, but he dared not loiter, and already he had heard enough to strengthen Ben Evans's assertion that there was something wrong—that the girl who had been in his mind day and night since he had glimpsed her on the bench under the cottonwood-tree, and Spiser's usual women guests, were not of an ilk.

Nan's appetite was gone. Dismay, apprehension, angry resentment had taken it entirely. She felt that she had been tricked, but for what purpose she, as yet, could not clearly see. She was too accustomed to respect and deference to believe that Spiser or any other person would dare to offer her serious offense.

The unresponsive coolness with which she met his gaiety seemed to disturb Spiser not at all as he ate and drank with keen enjoy-

ment, stopping occasionally to regard her with broad satisfaction.

Finally lighting a cigar, he leaned back in his chair and considered her comfortably.

"Looks pretty good to me to see you settin' there opposite—so sociable and homelike."

Nan's teeth shut together hard.

"Don't you think you'll like it?" He half closed his eyes and looked at her through a cloud of smoke.

"It's detestable!" she cried furiously. "You are detestable! I don't understand why you should have placed me in this position."

"Oh, yes, you do," he contradicted, good-naturedly. "Don't waste your breath telling any pretty little feminine fairy-tales like that. Any woman only half as smart as you are could see I've been crazy about you ever since I first saw you."

Nan flushed hotly.

"Isn't it possible for you to understand the light in which you have placed me?" she demanded. "Are you too utterly dense to realize what an unmanly, dishonorable advantage you have taken of me? I know now that

you had no intention of bringing your sister. You lied to me."

"Come, come, little girl, don't make a fuss and spoil a pleasant evening," he urged imperturbably. "You women are all alike; you pretend you don't like a high hand, but you do.

"Haven't you learned yet that when a man's in love he'll do most anything? I'm in love, and I'm the kind that takes what he wants in any way he can get it, in love or business, or politics.

"At this particular moment"—he shoved his chair from the table—"more than anything else in the world I want to kiss those scornful red lips of yours. The more you fight"—his short laugh was not agreeable—"the better I'll like it. I'm a master hand with broncs and women."

"How dare you! How dare you insult me so—in your house—your guest!" Nan's eyes blazed into his as she sprang to her feet at his advance.

"Yours, my dear—yours so long as you will have it."

"Let me out! Let me go!" Even with

the imperious demand she realized hopelessly that he had no intention of doing either, as he purposely stood between her and the door.

“Where?” He smiled in cynical amusement.

“Somewhere on this ranch there must be a decent man!” she cried furiously.

“My handsome foreman, perhaps?”

“Yes—your foreman, then!” she flashed defiantly.

“My foremen do not interfere in my affairs—new ones are too easy to get. Come, little girl”—his tone took on a conciliatory note—“cut it out, this tragedy business, and let’s be friends. You’re here. You’ve got to learn that Henry T. Spiser is boss. Boss of the L.X. outfit—boss of Hopedale County, and boss as much farther as the L.X. brand runs. Be sensible.”

He came toward her until his outstretched hands all but touched her shoulders.

Nan struck him a stinging blow across the face.

Spiser turned white with fury.

“Oh, if that’s your style——”

He grasped her wrist in a grip of steel.

Outside a horse coughed, and then they both heard the unmistakable sound of hoofs on the hard-trodden door-yard.

Nan shrieked: "Some one—please—*come!*"

The door was pushed open and a moccasined foot thrust in the crack before Spiser could drop the catch.

"What the devil do you want?" he demanded harshly of the intruder.

"What the devil should I want, *señor*," returned a voice with equanimity, "but a place to stay all night?"

"Mrs. Gallagher!"

"Señor Spiser!"

The piercing black eyes of the apparition that had come out of the night seemed actually to disconcert Spiser with their boring gaze. She was tall, gaunt, and straight as a Lombardy poplar.

Her high cheek bones told of Apache blood, and two tight braids of black hair sprouting from under either ear shone with some ointment, the pungency of which seemed to tear holes in the atmosphere. Her bright-hued garments were neither distinctively Indian, or Mexican, but a little of each.

She was a striking figure as she faced Spiser, passive yet somehow formidable.

“I will keep the señorita company.” She stood with her arms folded under her blanket waiting for him to go.

There was nothing else for him to do, so he went with a black look of vengeance, slamming the door behind him.

Nan, now trembling from head to foot, laid both hands upon the woman’s shoulders:

“Oh, it was dreadful!” she cried. “God must have sent you!”

The woman shook her head—

“Fritz Poth,” she said prosaically.

CHAPTER V

FLIGHT

WHILE Mrs. Gallagher reposed on guard on the couch outside her door, Nan tossed sleeplessly in the guest-chamber of the Esmeraldas ranch-house. The experience of the evening was a harsh one to a girl reared in ignorance of men of Spiser's type.

She thought that in some way she must have been to blame, too—lacking in reserve and dignity—else how could he have so misjudged her? And he had lied to her about his sister's coming—he had insulted her!

She felt cheapened, disgraced, to have figured in such an episode, and her cheeks burned again and again with shame.

It was some solace in her humiliation to know that Fritz Poth at least had not misunderstood her, else he would not have sent Mrs. Gallagher with such despatch for the very obvious reason of protection.

Nan remembered now that Fritz Poth had pointed Mrs. Gallagher out as a mongrel lady

with an Apache mother, a Mexican father, and, somewhere in the States, an Irish husband named Gallagher. The mongrel lady looked a monument of safety to Nan in her present plight.

And Ben Evans—what must he think? She was conscious that she cared what he thought. Some way, some time, she told herself, she must find an opportunity to explain something of the circumstances.

She fell into a doze, and when she awakened Mrs. Gallagher was regarding her from the doorway while she deftly rolled a brown-paper cigarette.

“He’s gone,” vouchsafed that person briefly.

Nan sprang out with energy.

“And we must go, too—at once!”

Mrs. Gallagher shrugged a lean shoulder.

“Yes, he’ll be back; but how we go?”

“I can ride.”

“What!” Mrs. Gallagher made an expressive gesture. “All the horses are turned out; mine, too.”

Nan raised the window-shade and stared at an empty corral.

"I will walk, then."

Mrs. Gallagher looked sceptically at Nan's small white feet.

"It is forty mile to Hopedale."

"It is less than that to El Oro."

Mrs. Gallagher looked doubtful.

"They are Mexican in El Oro and afraid of the Señor Spiser. They owe him money, or their father or their brother owe him money. He find out who give you a horse or let you stay all night, and he take their cow, horses, chickens—ever'thing. You have not live here long enough to understand, señorita."

"But the postmaster—"

Mrs. Gallagher's face brightened.

"I forget him. Yes, he will help you."

She understood now that "Old Man" Mac-Neil had been offering her his protection when he had told her that he was her nearest neighbor in case of "homesickness." And Fritz Poth with his sour looks, he too, in his way, had been trying to warn her. In the light of what had happened Nan seemed to herself to have been incredibly stupid.

"We will go to El Oro," she said decidedly, "and we must lose no time." Then, curiously,

“And you, Mrs. Gallagher, are not afraid of Spiser like all the rest?”

An enigmatic expression crossed the woman’s face.

“No; I am not afraid of the Señor Spiser. But for you—yes, I am afraid.”

They were eating a hasty breakfast when Mrs. Gallagher arose and walked quickly to the window.

A cloud of dust told of some one coming off the mesa, and Nan paled, thinking Spiser might be already returning.

“He is on horseback—coming fast; it is Ben Evans.”

Instantly Nan jumped to the conclusion that he had learned, or guessed, the truth and was coming to her aid. But her elation and relief were short, for he rode past the window without so much as a glance and stopped at the blacksmith-shop, near the men’s bunk-house.

He was only on an errand, and on one no more romantic and chivalrous than a half-dozen forgotten horseshoes.

Nan could see his face; soberness and then irresolution crept over it as Mrs. Gallagher hastened outside and explained the situation

to him. She seemed to be urging something with many vehement gestures. Was it possible, Nan asked herself, that he was hesitating?

He showed distress, indignation even; but there was nothing in his manner which conveyed the impression that he was burning with a knightly eagerness to rescue a fair maiden from the consequences of her indiscretion. He accompanied Mrs. Gallagher with no great alacrity, Nan thought, and her chin went a little higher in the air.

“I am sorry that it is necessary for us to bother you with our difficulties——”

“The *mujer* here has told me”—he looked at her with troubled eyes—“but I don’t just see how I can do what she asks.”

“And what is that?”

“Run in her horse and one for you. They’re waiting for me and if I—if I——” he redenied as he hesitated.

“Yes?”

He blurted the truth helplessly.

“If I took time I’d lose my job, seeing as Spiser ordered them all turned out!”

Nan stared at him—speechless. She almost doubted her own ears. This towering, pic-

turesque, six feet of manhood could not help a girl in her extremity because he might "lose his job!"

Again, Ben Evans, hero, fell from his pedestal with a crash.

His refusal seemed so inconsistent, so at variance with the chivalry and courage of his action in the Hopedale Opera-house that it bewildered her. She had not dreamed he would hesitate when he understood.

Spiser was right, she thought in quick and sweeping condemnation, when he had boasted that he was boss of the L.X. outfit and everything and everybody upon it.

Nan said coldly:

"I couldn't think, then, of permitting you to get a horse for me—of taking any such risk on my account. We shall make out somehow, I've no doubt." She turned into the house.

Ben suddenly had an uncomfortable feeling that his reason for failing to respond which seemed so adequate and convincing to himself did not appear so to Nan.

"Wait a minute," he protested. "Don't start away from here afoot. You can't walk;

it's too far, even to El Oro. I'll find a way to get word to some one that will come for you. Will you wait here until noon?"

Nan shook her head, but Mrs. Gallagher advised:

"It is better that way, señorita. It is too far for you to walk."

"We will wait, then," Nan unwillingly consented, "but"—acidly—"do not jeopardize your job."

Chilled, disappointed, she watched him ride away, her own predicament for the moment forgotten in the keen realization that in spite of his attractions Ben Evans was hopelessly plebeian.

As the hour approached twelve and the promised assistance did not arrive, Nan's uneasiness and impatience increased. She grew sceptical even of the sincerity of his intentions, but in this she wronged him, as she was glad to know when Mrs. Gallagher, doing sentinel duty from the pinnacle of the wood-pile, scrambled from her perch with the cheering news that some one was coming.

"A woman, I think; yes, an *Americana* leading two horses."

Nan's eyes were good but she herself could make out only two rapidly moving specks. Mrs. Gallagher was very positive, however, and a few minutes proved that she was right.

Nan did not immediately recognize the girl who rode up, flushed and breathless from the fast gallop and the effort of leading two unwilling horses.

Her hat was awry and her faded habit powdered with dust when she drew rein in the dooryard where Nan was waiting. She said without ceremony:

“Throw what you need in a sack that we can tie behind, and pile on as fast as you can. Spiser's liable to be back any minute. I thought I saw him drive out of a gulch as I dropped off the mesa.”

Nan remembered her now. It was the girl who had ridden beside Ben Evans that first day in Hopedale. Fritz Poth had said her name was Blakely—Edith Blakely.

“But I don't care if he does come, now that I am not dependent upon him for the means of getting away,” Nan replied defiantly.

Edith glanced nervously toward the mesa.

"But I don't want him to see me here—hurry, please!"

So Edith Blakely was afraid of the Hon. "Hank" Spiser? Nan pondered this wonderingly as she quickly did as she was bid. She noticed that it was not until they were out of the valley of the Esmeraldas and well along on a dim trail which branched from the main road, that the girl ceased to glance fearfully over her shoulder.

"I came as soon as I could," she said, "but dad wasn't home when I got the message from Ben and I had to get these horses off the range myself."

"You can't imagine what a tremendous favor you've done me," said Nan gratefully as they galloped rapidly side by side.

"It's nothing at all—just so long as Spiser doesn't find it out."

Again Nan wondered why she should care, but did not ask because the girl was adding in a half-apologetic tone:

"You-all won't find much of a place, but ma said she'd have dinner ready, and we can fix you up somehow."

"You can believe," Nan replied grimly, "that I am not in a mood to be critical."

The dismal bay of hounds, the shrill yip of many mongrel kiyis, told them they were nearing the Blakely home, which was hidden in the tall *torneo* of the Longhorn *bosque*, less than a mile from the Rio Grande.

They came abruptly into a clearing where a log-house and yard were enclosed in a stockade of upright poles.

With the barking of the dogs, children of every age and size and stage of dress and undress came tumbling through the doors and from the windows, as Nan could see in spaces between the poles.

"Where's ma?" asked Edith as she unfastened the stockade gate and swung it open. "Isn't she home, Clytie?"

Clytie rested one bare foot on the instep of the other, and giggled.

"Nope. She went a couple of miles down the road to borry a little salt from them campers."

A look of weariness succeeded annoyance in Edith's face.

"Go inside," said Edith to Nan and Mrs. Gallagher, "I'll soon have dinner ready."

"Rest yoah hat and take the rockin'-chair," said the long-legged Clytie hospitably to Nan as she lifted a dog by the scruff of its neck from the cushioned seat and threw it casually out the door.

Another dog was slumbering in the ashes of the fireplace, the chimney of which leaned like the tower of Pisa. Two pullets regarded Nan inquiringly from the top of a dismantled sewing-machine, while the floor was littered with the immortal works of Bertha M. Clay and the daubing of mud which had dropped in chunks from between the logs.

Nan was all but surrounded by tow-headed, barefooted Blakelys staring at her with all their pale-blue eyes as she sat down in the designated rocking-chair.

Leaning back to fan herself with her hat, the chair-legs came out of the rockers. The accident occasioned much merriment.

"Ma's goin' to fix that some time when she kin git around to it," Clytie clapped both hands over her mouth and giggled.

With the renewed barking of the dogs and

the slamming of the stockade gate, the fascinated circle rushed pell-mell through the door to swarm over a lank, spiritless figure in a slat sunbonnet.

“Ma, where you been? I’m hungry!”

“Ma, ain’t you ever goin’ to git us anything to eat?”

“My lands, don’t you children ever aim to give me a minute’s peace or rest till I’m daid?”

“You ain’t daid yet, ma, and it’s past dinner-time!”

Mrs. Blakely untied her bonnet-strings and sauntered leisurely toward the house.

“Howdy!” She smiled amiably at Nan and sat down on the doorstep, to retwist a small knob of ginger-colored hair.

“Clytie, git ma a drink of water!”

“Regina, git ma a drink of water.”

“Luna, git ma a drink of water.”

“Carmencita, git ma a drink of water.”

The request was passed down the line until it reached Undine, who finally came toddling with the water splashing in a gourd.

Edith’s face clouded when she returned from putting the horses away to find her

mother fanning herself languidly on the door-step.

"We're nearly starved, ma," she said shortly.

"I reckon you be, honey, and I aimed to be back, but I fell in with kind of a gipsy feller down there at them campers and he tole all our fortunes."

"Never mind that now; we'd better start the fire."

Mrs. Blakely sighed resignedly.

"Clytie, git ma an urpernful of chips."

"Regina, git ma an urpernful of chips."

"Luna, git ma——"

Edith started for the woodpile before the request reached Undine, but her mother called her back.

"Wait a minute, honey, till I tell you about yoah fortune."

Edith lingered impatiently.

"That gipsy feller said, Edie, that you stood in grave and immejit danger of losin' yoah beau. He said," she drawled solemnly, "that another girl, what was a stranger to you, was comin' between you, and you'd only git him out'n her clutches by strategum."

Edith tossed her head and went on her way for chips.

"You don't believe it, but I've warned you," declared Mrs. Blakely. "But Clytie, here"—she rambled on—"is goin' to ketch some rich feller and marry young. Not too young, though; honey, promise me that."

The shanghai-like Clytie looked a long way from matrimony as she leaned against the house endeavoring to interlace her toes.

"And me"—Mrs. Blakely beamed in anticipation—"I'm goin' to fall heir to a large fortune. Must be yoah pa's brother what cans aigs up in Wichita, Edie."

Mrs. Blakely rose slowly, in sections as it seemed, and followed Edith into the kitchen where the rattle of the stove told of preparations for the tardy dinner.

Bedlam broke loose with the waning of the temporary shyness of the little Blakelys. Some now beat upon the side of the house with clubs, jarring down the little that remained of the chinking. They yelled, they sang, they quarreled, and there was a sufficient number to keep at least one stiff fight going all the time.

They tried to bridle and ride the rooster, they threw handfuls of dust in each other's hair and rocks at each other's heads. The flies swarmed and the dogs contributed their share to the din.

The thought of spending the night in the squalor of this shiftless, Texas home filled Nan with apprehension. It was something for which to be thankful, she said to herself, with a faint smile, that the "prep" brother could not see her in her present surroundings.

And Bob! how he would chortle! No, on second thought, she did not believe that he would.

Mrs. Gallagher, squatting on her heels on the shady side of the house, was not nearly so indifferent to the discomforts of the Blakely home with its riotous little Blakelys, as she appeared, for she found an opportunity to say to Nan:

"I think it is better that we ride to Las Rubertas—seven miles—because here, *señorita*"—she rolled her eyes with something of droll humor in their depths—"there are too many *niños*. You will not sleep very well, perhaps."

"I am afraid it will be rather dreadful," Nan admitted. "But where would we go in Las Rubertas?"

"To the Doña Luiza Montejo; she will let us have one-half of her dobe. I know the Doña Luiza a long time."

"But shall we be welcome?" Nan asked doubtfully.

"Why not?" Mrs. Gallagher shrugged her shoulders; that was a small matter, it seemed.

"It shall be as you say," said Nan, for she already had read liking and loyalty in her strange protector's eyes.

A yell from the dooryard.

"Ma, I'm goin' to bust Undine's head in if you don't gimme somethin' to eat!" One of the Misses Blakely brandished a barrel-stave.

"Don't do nothin' like that," said Mrs. Blakely reprovingly; "'tain't ladylike and, besides, grub's piled." She called cordially to Nan: "Come and git it!"

The hungry horde sniffing outside the kitchen door made a rush for the chairs, benches and boxes ranged along the table.

"Where's your manners, children?" inquired Mrs. Blakely placidly, as they pushed and fought.

"Outdoors! ha! ha!"

The youthful wit was jerked from a chair and Mrs. Blakely nodded at Nan.

"Slide in thar, and," she urged humorously, "jest grab a root and pull."

A monument of pale soda-biscuits in the center of the table faded even as Nan looked, while eager hands, each gripping a fork, reached for the platter of salt pork swimming in its own grease.

Mrs. Blakely circulated with a huge, tin coffee-pot from which she poured a feeble beverage that might as easily have been tea as coffee.

"Charlie, my lamb," chided Mrs. Blakely in gentle forbearance, "don't put yoah knee on the table. If you-all kain't retch what you want, ast for it."

"Who'd hear me?" inquired Charles, and with some reason.

"Looks like yoah pa would git around to his meals on time once in a while!" Mrs. Blakely shuffled to the door. "Puts me be-

hind so with my work when—here he is now, Frederick, aidge over and make a place for pa."

The uproar drowned the jangle of spurs, but shortly a man, lean and stooped from much riding, bent his head to come through the doorway.

Shrieks greeted him; it was obvious that Blakely was popular with his family.

He nodded to Nan with a pleasant though slightly inquiring look, and hung his hat upon a nail.

Nan saw that Edith was like her father. She had his earnest, dark eyes and her softer features were feminine duplicates of his; they were stamped, too, with something of the same uncomplaining patience. She was as unlike her vapid, weak-chinned mother as two persons well could be.

The red-haired baby in his home-made high-chair suddenly threw himself back and let out a yell. His mouth, which was a slit when closed, now looked quite square, and his feet beat a tattoo under the table.

" 'Lasses! 'lasses! Want 'lasses!'"

Mrs. Blakely looked at him fondly.

"Bless 'm heart 'm want 'lasses, 'm shall have 'lasses! Clytie, git ma the sorghum."

The roaring infant did not subside until Edith took a huge glass sirup-jug from the cupboard and set it down beside him. Then laying her hand upon her father's shoulder she looked searchingly in his face and asked:

"What's gone wrong to-day, dad? What's happened?"

He hesitated a moment before replying.

"John Aker's house was blown up last night."

In the first silence of astonishment Nan saw Edith's face pale.

"Were they killed?"

Blakely shook his head.

"They all were gone for the night. A stick of dynamite under one corner did it; it's a wreck to-day."

Mrs. Blakely, who was barely visible through a cloud of smoke from burning pork, began to sniffle.

"We-all will be next, you mark my words!"

"Don't want to be blowed up, pa!" A chorus of minor wails started.

"Hush"—turning to Nan in explanation—

"he was a neighbor of ours in Texas, and we wagoned here together. Spiser sent us both word not to settle, but we settled just the same and each of us got a little bunch of cattle together. For some reason he's offered to buy me out, at his own price, but he aims to scare John out of the country, and this is the start." Blakely's voice was bitter.

"Now, Charlie, why don't you take Spiser's offer up?" Mrs. Blakely advanced, pleadingly, with a long-handled spoon. "We-all have been here two year, and I'm gittin' restless. Let's hitch up the ol' white team and wagon it up into Arkansaw. I'm pinin' to travel," declared Mrs. Blakely plaintively, "to see the world agin—and Arkansaw!"

"I'm not," Blakely replied grimly. "I've had enough malaria to hold me for a while—and wagonin' too."

One does not start the water from a faucet with more ease than Mrs. Blakely turned on the tears.

"Now, Charlie"—she settled into her hips in an attitude of despair—"you'll go and git yoahself killed off, then I'll have to take in

washin' or put the children in the poah-house and go on the stage."

"Don't you put me in the poah-house, ma, or I'll baste Undine over the haid."

Mrs. Blakely turned wet eyes upon her offspring.

"Don't do nothin' like that, my lamb. Clytie, git ma a handkerchief."

"Regina, git ma—"

"Undine, hand ma that urpern off the chair."

Mrs. Blakely buried her face in the apron and a sympathetic bellow arose—a bellow so loud that no one heard the rattle of wheels and the subsequent click of heels upon the hard-trodden dooryard.

It was not until Edith's startled stare caught their attention that the Blakely family were aware that the Hon. "Hank" Spiser was regarding them with a faint sneer upon his face from the doorway.

An ogre in their midst would have had much the same effect. He stared hardest at Nan, who made no motion to return his sweeping salutation.

"Ah—I am relieved to find you here and safe," he said.

"I am fortunate to be here—and *safe*," she replied with cold significance.

He said no more. It was enough to have learned, as he suspected, that she was sheltered by the Blakelys.

"I stopped"—he addressed Blakely—"to ask if you had decided to accept my offer?"

Blakely returned his gaze steadily, and shook his head.

"Not *yet*. There's no good reason why I should make a present of my stock to the L.X. Cattle Company."

"It's a fair offer—under the circumstances."

"A good offer—under the circumstances—but less than half their value."

"You may be glad to take it." His tone was a threat.

"Possibly," Blakely smiled. "When that time comes I'll let you know."

"This is *final*!"

"Final."

Spiser turned abruptly on his heel and walked away.

CHAPTER VI

A LESSON IN LOVE

WAS it only two months since she had come to live in the half of the Señor Epiphanio Montejo's long dobe in the Mexican village of Las Rubertas? Nan was asking herself as she sat in her doorway, watching the colors of the sunset fade behind the distant range.

It seemed to Nan that it might have been two years, or always, that she had heard the coyotes barking at the edge of Señor Epiphanio's alfalfa field and listened to the splash of falling earth as the everchanging Rio Grande ate away its banks.

Home, the censorious family, Bob, seemed very far away. Forgetfulness was in the languorous air of spring. Much and little had happened since she had become a part of the placid, picturesque village life. The war with Spain was well under way, and she had come to know Ben Evans far better than she ever had expected to know him after the

disappointing episode at the Esmeraldas ranch.

Spiser had let her distinctly alone, which was not like Spiser, but she was not curious as to his reason since it was so. Mrs. Gallagher now called her *chiquita* occasionally, and in unguarded moments showed her affection. Nan rode daily on horseback and studied Spanish with the pompous schoolmaster.

She felt a twinge of conscience when anxious and reproachful letters came from home in the erratic mails, and she dreaded rather than welcomed them, for they only served to remind her that some time this dreamy, unreal life must end. And when she thought of that she thought of Ben Evans.

She was waiting for him now, as he had sent word that he might be able to come, and soon her listening ear heard him greeting a Mexican in the plaza. The big sorrel he rode ambled into sight and stopped at the bars as the moon rose full and round, flooding the world with its white light.

He dropped the reins at the horse's head and came toward her eagerly. He did not

let go the hand she extended, but kept it in his own as he sat down beside her.

The tinkle of many guitars now mingled with the sound of the river, and the air was sweet with the scents of spring and the incenselike odor of burning piñon. The village looked a corner of fairyland in the light of the luminous moon and the spell of the night was upon them both.

“I’m glad you could come.”

“Are you—honest?”

“Honest.”

“I wanted to come—I couldn’t stay away to-night.”

“Not even if you lost your job?” Nan had forgiven, perhaps, but not forgotten that.

“Don’t!” It was a sore subject with him now.

They were silent for a time, but it was a silence as significant as words.

“I like you,” he said at last, huskily, with an effort.

“Like me? Is that all?”

“A whole lot.”

“I like a great many people a whole lot—

Mrs. Gallagher for instance," she looked at him slyly.

"Ah—you know what I mean!"

"How should I if you don't tell me?"

He moved uneasily.

"Better than anybody!"

She considered.

"Better than Edith Blakely?"

Ben hesitated, and Nan suddenly felt more than a pang of jealousy.

"More than Edith Blakely?" The demand this time was vehement.

"More than Edith Blakely," he admitted.

After another silence Nan said innocently:

"It isn't so much to say that you like me better than anybody."

"What would I say?" he asked, surprised.

"Can't you imagine?" Her eyes danced.

He shook his head.

"You might say that you love me."

He drew back startled.

"Lord! I couldn't say that!"

She took her hand away. "Of course not, if you don't feel it."

"Tain't that," he explained anxiously; "but that's soft. That's talkin' like a novel."

“Nonsense—say it!”

He squirmed, and Nan saw him grow red in the moonlight.

“Aw—g’wan—I couldn’t say that.”

“Say it, if you mean it!” she demanded, imperiously.

“You won’t laugh at me?” suspiciously.

She shook her head.

Shamefacedly he stammered while the perspiration came out on his forehead:

“Love—I love you——”

“More than anybody!”

“More than anybody,” he repeated after her.

He did not find it so difficult again.

In the soft radiance of the enchanted night, being young and unhampered and exalted of mood, they murmured to each other something of their thoughts and feelings, each halting admission furnishing a fresh thrill.

“*Tu estas mi querida!*” Ben looked at her in ecstasy. “You are sweet—you are beautiful! I never saw a girl like you.”

“Time to go to bed!” Mrs. Gallagher’s prosaic interruption from the Montejo door-

step at the far end of the dobe came to remind them that the evening had passed.

“You will come again soon?” Nan whispered softly.

“Soon,” he replied.

Nan sat with her chin in her palm watching horse and rider disappear in the moonlight. The glamour of the hour and his ardent, if awkward, love-making was still upon her, but with his going there began the persistent, disquieting voice of conscience inquiring: “Where are you drifting? When is this to end, and how? Are you in earnest, and if you are not, are you fair to Ben?”

Nan had long since come to see that she and Ben were far apart in their instincts and their standards. They seldom held the same opinions of people or things, because his reasoning was faulty and his logic askew; but she excused and palliated as she did his frequent slips in English, his omission of the small courtesies, his amazing ignorance of any world but his own.

It was a significant fact that as Nan became less and less conscious of his deficiencies, more tolerant of his shortcomings, she pro-

portionately exalted those qualities which she excessively admired—namely, his physical courage and his recognized skill along his own line.

As she sat in the doorway the family seemed to rise before her like startled ghosts, and the small, insistent voice with its pertinent questions contributed to her uneasy feeling of wrong-doing.

“O, señorita!”

Nan turned to see a small figure in a tattered shawl standing irresolutely at the corner of the house.

“Rosario!” Any interruption was welcome at the moment.

Rosario Richards crept to her side like a beaten little dog. Rosario Richards, whose Mexican mother had married one of the hated gringos, and for whom her mother’s people, with whom she lived, had no love because of her gringo blood.

Rosario, the sensitive little half-breed, who shyly brought Nan offerings of horned toads, queer lizards, and soap-root so that her hair might shine like the hair of the Señorita Perfecta Torres. She leaned her forehead

against Nan's arm and began to cry softly:

“I haf so ver’, ver’ many troubles, señorita, that I cannot sleep!”

Nan laid her arm about her shoulders and drew her closer.

“Tell me some of them, Rosario.”

“*Mi madre!*” she wailed softly—“if I haf not *mi madre!*”

“Yes, that is a trouble.”

“*Mi padre!* If only I haf *mi padre!* He was kill in the street when he fight in El Paso. *Mi madre* she die of the smallpox.”

“Yes, those are troubles. And they are not good to you, Rosario—the Fuentes—your mother’s people?”

“Like the dogs, I get what is left.”

“Do they whip you, Rosario?”

“*Sí, sí*, but it is not that.”

“What, then?”

“I have no *tunica*—what you call dress—to wear, and to-morrow afternoon is the las’ day of school.”

“And that is a very important day!”

“*O, sí, sí, señorita!*” Rosario’s eyes grew big with the importance of it. “All the people come to hear the lessons and to see

us speak the piece from the platform. Every *niño* wear his bes' clothes.

"I have been ver' good; I work hart. I wash all the clothes. I sweep all the floor and do the dishes ver' careful, so maybe they give me the new dress for the las' day of school.

"To-night they laugh at me and say: 'The ol' dress is good enough for a gringo!' I haf learn the longest piece in the hymn-book to speak from the platform, but when the teacher call 'Rosario Richards' I must shake my head, for I will not stand up before them all in the ol' shoes of Señora Fuentes and the ol' dress."

The child threw aside her shawl to show her rags, and thrust out the woman's shoe tied on with twine. "I haf nothing but this—*nada! nada!*" She buried her face in her shawl.

"I had no idea that you had so very many troubles, Rosario."

"Ver', ver' many troubles, señorita."

"What color do you like best—the very best of all?"

Rosario considered.

“I lak ret—and I *lof* yellow!”

“Good, Rosario! So do I. Listen:” Nan began to smile as her thought grew. “If there is time to make it, you shall have the most beautiful dress in Las Rubertas for the last day of school!”

Rosario’s eyes were round with astonishment, and perhaps a little doubt; of course the señorita was wonderful, but she had not seen all the beautiful dresses in Las Rubertas.

Therefore Rosario’s eyes outshone the candle in her hand when they went inside and Nan brought up from the bottommost depths of her trunk such a silk dress as Las Rubertas never had dreamed. How it shimmered! How it shone! How soft it was!

“O, señorita!” breathed Rosario, and Nan laughed gleefully at her shining, astonished eyes.

“If you can help me, we’ll rip it to pieces to-night.”

“Oh, I can help!” declared Rosario with such earnestness that Nan laughed aloud.

Carefully, so carefully, Rosario ripped her seam by the dim candle-light, stopping only,

now and then, to rub her palm in ecstasy over the glossy surface.

"It is so be-a-u-teeful, señorita! Oh, *miy hermosa!*" Then she would hug herself in a transport of delight.

"More be-a-u-teeful than the dress of the Señorita Perfecta that come from El Paso." Once she stopped and looked up soberly.

"They will be ver' mad at you, señorita."

"There will be no love lost," Nan declared gaily. "They do not like me, anyway."

"They no lak *Americanos*," agreed Rosario gravely. "They 'fraid, yes; but, too, they hate *Americanos*."

It was nearly midnight when Rosario crept back to her sheepskin where she lay among the snoring Fuentes, dreaming of her coming triumph.

For a person who was dressed when she lighted her cigarette and readjusted her blanket, Mrs. Gallagher showed a surprising interest in and knowledge of clothes.

She entered into the work of remodeling Nan's frock for Rosario the next morning with a zest which slightly astonished Nan until she discovered it was due as much to a

desire to turn Las Rubertas, and the Fuentes in particular, with whom she had had several spirited encounters, green with envy as to give Rosario happiness.

But whatever her motive, the result was the same, since she supplied the knowledge of cutting and basting laboriously acquired at a mission school, which Nan lacked.

Rosario ran from school at recess for a final fitting, and at noon she all but swallowed her *tortillas* whole. The Fuentes, however, were too engrossed in arraying themselves in their own splendor to observe the excitement and haste of the despised little gringo.

While Nan brushed Rosario's thick hair and tied the long braid with a gorgeous satin bow, Mrs. Gallagher buttoned on the best shoes that the Señor Apedaca kept among his meager stock of groceries.

And when the yellow dress, soft and shimmering as cobwebs in the sun, was slipped over her head and buttoned up behind, Rosario stood speechless before the reflection she saw in the big mirror which Nan held up before her.

She had never hoped to look like that. She

never had dreamed that any little gringo could look like that, and her black eyes turned to stars as she stared. She could only say chokingly, in gratitude and delight:

“Oh, ver’, ver’, be-a-u-teeful, señorita!”

But her crowning glory was the string of gold beads which Nan clasped about her neck. Truly, it was worth being a gringo to have this moment!

Mrs. Gallagher chuckled maliciously. She was thinking of the Fuentes’s chagrin.

And when the time came it was worth ripping seams by candle-light to Nan; it was worth the loss of half a day on the shady side of the dobe to Mrs. Gallagher, merely to see Rosario, with her head proudly erect, walk down the aisle as the pompous master rang his bell for order. It was well worth the trouble if only to see the Fuentes’s bulging eyes and Señorita Perfecta Torres’s look of envy.

The benches of the schoolroom were crowded with visitors, but, when the schoolmaster, self-conscious and perspiring in his best black clothes—winter-weight—seated himself in his squeaking rocking-chair and

pointed directly at Rosario with his long stick, a silence fell in which the buzzing of the flies upon the window-panes could be distinctly heard.

“Rosario Richards will please recite 7 times 1 are 7,” commanded the schoolmaster.

Rosario and the schoolmaster knew what the visitors did not—namely, that Rosario’s class had not yet reached “7 times 1 are 7”—that that difficult table was two lessons further on.

But her unexpected splendor had not escaped him, and he knew that he would make no mistake with the families who controlled his reappointment by taking down a peg this little upstart half-breed so radiant in her borrowed finery.

More than once, too, she had argued stoutly against his pronunciation of the English which he was required by law to teach in the school; therefore something of his supreme satisfaction at this rare opportunity to humiliate her before her beloved *Americana* and *Las Rubertas* shone in his slits of eyes.

Nan caught the startled look upon Ro-

sario's face and heard the faint titter from her classmates throughout the schoolroom in her moment of hesitation.

Perhaps Rosario heard the titter, too. At any rate her gringo blood responded royally to the challenge. Her cheeks were burning, her eyes glowing like stars as she rose to her feet, an olive-tinted little beauty in yellow silk, baited by her enemies. Slowly, very slowly, but surely, Rosario recited "7 times 1 are 7" even to 7 times 7 are 49, and 7 times 12 are 84.

It would have been wonderful even for a grown person who was not a schoolmaster, to know so much, Las Rubertas admitted to itself in deep and envious astonishment. But there was no applause on that account and she finished in silence, rewarded only by a beaming smile from Nan.

And how the little Fuentes, gorgeous in green sateen, stammered over 2 times 9, and the little Montejos sat down sniffling because 4 times 8 did not make 31.

It was a succession of triumphs for Rosario who, inspired by the presence of her adored friend *la Americana*, and given confidence by

the knowledge that she was wearing the “mos’ be-a-u-teeful *tunica* in Las Rubertas,” outspelled and outread them all.

But Rosario’s supreme moment came when the scowling schoolmaster called upon her for her “piece” which was to be spoken from the platform, and from which divers small claimants for histrionic honors already had stumbled, weeping and disgraced, to their seats.

Rosario took care to finger her gold beads as she walked to the platform—gold beads are wonderfully stimulating upon occasions of the kind—and as she made her small curtsey she did not forget to smooth down the soft gathers of her skirt lest there be dull ones—oh, some very dull ones present who had not observed that it was changeable and sometimes shone a little pink as well as yellow in the deepest folds.

Nor did she neglect as she recited to draw her long braid of hair with the broad satin bow on the end over her shoulder, for the same most excellent reason.

It was a hymn she had learned—the longest in the hymn-book—nine verses and doleful—

about death, and worms—but she caroled it like a bird—a flashing yellow-bird—with her eyes dancing and her mouth dimpling at the corners, as though death and worms were the most joyful and joyous things in all the world when one was wearing gold beads and shimmering silk.

As she stepped down from the platform with her little chin in the air, proud in the consciousness that no one else in school could say nine verses out of the hymn-book without a mistake, there was no relenting in the heavy, upturned faces of the envious parents and friends. But Rosario did not mind the sullen silence in which her new shoes squeaked beautifully, for, to the little Cinderella of Las Rubertas, Nan's radiant smile of approbation was quite reward enough.

CHAPTER VII

THE HEART OF THE WILD DOVE

THE damper was closed and smoke from the newly kindled fire was pouring from every crevice of the stove, but Mrs. Blakely, absent-mindedly washing dishes in cold water, was above such small annoyances.

“Edie,” her ungartered stockings slipping over the heels of her carpet slippers, muffled her footsteps as she walked across the floor and pulled aside a red calico curtain behind which her daughter was changing to her riding clothes.

“Edie, that gipsy feller told the right of it when he said a strange girl was goin’ to cut you-all out.”

Edith winced a little, but said nothing.

“We ain’t had a sight of Ben Evans for three weeks, have we?”

Edith replied shortly:

“He’s busy; they’re branding at the L.X.”

“Not too busy to ride his string of horses down a gittin’ to Las Rubertas every time

they're camped within thirty miles of the place," retorted Mrs. Blakely.

"How do you know?"

"I was tole," replied Mrs. Blakely with offended dignity.

Edith declared stoutly:

"I don't believe it!"

"You'll find out too late. When I was a girl"—Mrs. Blakely sighed sentimentally—"pa couldn't keep enough hay to winter his stock for the saddle-horses tied to his stacks. You know that song, 'The Yeller Rose of Texas beats the Belles of Tennessee'? Well, they's some says that was wrote about me. Anyway, I never lost a beau through bein' cut out. Edie"—Mrs. Blakely grew melodramatic—"I'd resort to nearly any vermin-fuge first!"

"What?"

"Fair means or foul, I'd keep him if I wanted him."

Edith pinned on her hat and did not look at her mother as she asked:

"But how would you keep him if he didn't want you?"

"They's ways!" Mrs. Blakely raised a

mysterious finger. Tiptoeing to the door to peer out she inadvertently stepped on her stocking with the other foot. "Drat it!" Coming back. "I'd charm him!"

Edith looked a question.

"They's ways," she repeated, and Edith lingered. "If you'll jest do what I tell you it'll fetch him." Mrs. Blakely was more than pleased at this rare opportunity to discuss the art and gentle practises of love. It was a subject which was never very far from her thoughts, but her sentimental tendencies received small encouragement from her prosaic husband and eldest daughter.

"Edie," she whispered, "you sprinkle the ashes of the heart of a wild dove on him and you got him! The receipt is to kill it yoahself, burn its heart to ashes and slip it in his pocket or sprinkle him."

"Did you try it on dad?"

Mrs. Blakely tossed her head.

"Never had to. An ole lady what had charmed and buried foah husbands, poah soul, tole me."

Edith heard her father calling impatiently, and hurried out. There was a furrow be-

tween Blakely's eyebrows and fine lines of anxiety in his face.

"You ride the range I went over yesterday, Edie. I thought I covered it well, but there's a chance I may have missed them. They might have been in the brush somewhere's out of the way of the flies. I hope so; but in my heart I know they ain't. We're short fifteen head now, and if we don't find them to-day I'll be sure that they're rustled, and that means that we've got to fight or git. We won't hardly dare to sleep now."

"No, dad." They separated to ride the range in different directions in search of the missing cattle, each with a heavy heart, but from different causes.

Blakely's face was dark with thoughts of Spiser, the unscrupulous bully who would trample him and his into the earth without a qualm for a little strip of water and a few miles of range. Stinging tears blinded Edith's eyes as instinctively she turned her horse up the trail which led out of the cool thicket to the hot mesa.

"It isn't fair!" she sobbed softly, bending over her horse's neck—"it isn't fair at all!

She has everything and I have nothing, but she's taken Ben! It ain't right." Her tears fell on the pony's mane. "I like him more than she does—I *know* I do."

The injustice of life and the seeming futility of combating it fell upon her young shoulders that morning with crushing weight. It was a relief to be alone and to sob her heart out to the unanswering air. She could not make a confidant of her foolish, sentimental mother, nor add to her father's depression by telling him of this new sorrow.

She loved Ben simply and unreservedly, with none of the conflicting emotions which disturbed Nan's peace of mind. He was a man like her father, the only type that had entered into her girlish dreams; she had no romantic notions of a rich husband and a life of which she was ignorant.

She would have been content to have lived over again the life of her mother with its poverty and hardships, providing it was with Ben. She loved him loyally, jealously, with her whole heart, and she wanted him—oh, how she wanted him!—and she had lost him.

This strange girl, whom she could not really

hate because she was so kind, with her daintiness, her unaffected graces, her unconscious coquetry, had taken him from her without an effort.

And Edith had not her rival's ready wit, her merry laugh, her sparkling eyes, with which to win him back; she had only her commonplace prettiness and her commonplace devotion to offer him. These harsh truths did not make his frank desertion of her any easier to bear.

"Oh my! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" she sobbed, and the tears fell faster—miserably conscious that she was commonplace, even in her grief.

She had been so buoyant, life had been so sweet in spite of the struggle, until Nan came. Ben never had exactly told her that he cared more for her than for any of the few women of his acquaintance, but he had looked it. He frequently rode out of his way to eat with them, and he had given her presents at Christmas.

The reins were loose on the pony's neck, and he was going his own gait and direction when the familiar cowboy whoop made her

raise her head. Ben Evans was galloping towards her, and already too close for her to remove all traces of her tears, though she quickly did her best.

His face, which had been alight with a friendly smile, sobered.

“What’s the matter? What’s happened?”

She bit her lip hard and turned her head from him.

“Tell me, Edie,” he demanded solicitously, and laid his hand upon her arm.

The familiar action started her tears afresh.

“Nothing—oh, I don’t know!” she sobbed.

“Of course you do. You ain’t the girl to cry for nothing.”

But she had too much woman’s pride to tell him the truth if he was too dense, too little interested, to guess.

“It’s the cattle”—she kept her face from him—“we’re losing them.”

“Disease—dyin’ you mean?”

“Rustlers.”

“The greasers, you think?”

She shook her head.

“They’re goin’ too fast for that. The

greasers only kill for beef. Some one's run-
ning them off."

Ben's face was a mixture of many emo-
tions.

"Who do you think it is?"

"Who do you think it would be?" demanded
Edith bitterly. "There's only one person
that wants to break us."

"Look here, Edie," he caught her arm and
demanded angrily: "You don't think I've
had any hand in it or knew anything about
it?"

She looked at him squarely.

"No, Ben, not a minute. You know too
well what this little bunch of cattle means to
us. You've seen me ridin' these mesas and
arroyos summer and winter, just like a boy.
Doin' anything to help dad, now he's got a
little start.

"You know what it is to ride with the wind
scorching you, blowing red-hot like it came
out of a furnace, the sun fair dryin' up the
blood in your veins, and your eyes half-blind
and bloodshot from the glare.

"And you know what it is to ride in winter

with your hands so numb you can't hold the bridle reins or feel your feet in the stirrups."

"You bet I know," he replied with emphatic sympathy, "and you're the nerviest girl in the country, Edie. I sure brag on you whenever I get the chance. You-all deserve to make your stake and I'm mighty glad that you didn't think I knew anything about the cattle you been losin'. I won't say I never rustled none for maybe I have, but rustlin' from a friend—why, say, that's downright stealin'."

"I like to think that you consider me—us that," with a touch of shy coquetry.

"What"—he turned in his saddle and looked at her in astonishment—"you haven't been thinkin' that I don't look on you folks as my friends!"

"We haven't seen much of you lately," Edith replied, very busy straightening her stirrup that she need not meet his eye. "We waited Sunday dinner twice."

"Did you now!—why, you shouldn't a done that."

"You used to come so regular we kinda got in the way of expectin' you." Her voice shook a little but Ben did not seem to notice it.

"I was a pretty steady boarder there for a while," he admitted unconcernedly, "but you shouldn't a put yourself out none."

His indifference hurt her so much that she could think of nothing more to say, and they rode for nearly half a mile in silence before he asked:

"How long since the count on your cattle didn't come out right, Edie?"

"About ten days, or two weeks."

He frowned in thought.

It was a week, ten days—yes, two weeks ago, that Spiser had sent Kansas Ed to ride this particular range and brand. That yellowback cowpuncher was just the petty-larceny thief he would send to do a trick of the kind.

"I've got to quit you here"—he brought his horse to a standstill—"but tell your dad I'll keep my eyes open, and if I learn anything I'll send him word."

"All right, Ben," she said with an effort, and added in a kind of desperation, "I s'pose you couldn't come yourself?"

"Can't promise—I might—but"—with a short laugh—"Spiser's ridin' herd on me

pretty close lately. I'm liable to get my time if I don't look out."

He knew, and he knew that Edith knew, why Spiser was "riding herd" on him, but he could not resist the temptation to boast to Edith of his attachment to Nan, even while more than dimly aware of the stab it gave her.

He was as sure of Edith and her devotion as of the rising of the sun and, while he enjoyed it and would have missed it, he accepted it with the same complacency with which he accepted the benefits of that luminary.

Yet after he had nodded a careless good-by, the reproach in her eyes prompted him to turn impulsively and call after her:

"Oh, Edie, wait a minute!"

He rode back and said with more of the old familiar voice and manner than he had displayed:

"Say, Edie, they're talkin' of a *baile* at Las Rubertas; will you go?"

Glad surprise shone in her face.

"Why, yes, Ben, I'd love to."

But it faded when he said:

"We can stop for Nan and all go together."

She must share him with her rival—and he called her “Nan.” Edith’s heart lay heavier in her breast than before but she answered bravely:

“Yes; that will be nice.”

The knowledge that she would see him again shortly was something to which to look forward and, deep down, there was always the hope that in some way he might come back to her. All that day as she searched the arroyos and the thickets for the missing cattle, the thought of her mother’s foolish love-charm returned persistently until a half-formed purpose grew in her mind to try on Ben the charm of the heart of the wild dove which, if it did no good, at least would do no harm.

CHAPTER VIII

PREPARING FOR THE BALL

NAN was quickly made to feel that she had done no small thing in offending the mothers of Las Rubertas. They took it as a personal affront that she had made it possible for Rosario Richards to so eclipse their own progeny upon the one important occasion of the school year.

Her borrowing neighbors ceased their demands and cast dark looks at her end of the Montejo dobe as they passed in the street.

The little Montejos no longer played in her dooryard, and Señor Epiphanio forgot to say "*muchas gracias, señorita,*" when he returned the rope which he took each day to choke his pig, that it might not become too spirited and jump out of its pen.

Then one day Maria Torres cried "Gringo" as she passed the door, and spat contemptuously.

The Mexican who brought her firewood stole it again at night, and when Nan's saddle-

horse was found grazing in Pedro Fuentes's alfalfa field, although the corral gate had been securely tied, Señor Fuentes appeared with suspicious alacrity to collect damages.

The last straw was the request of Señora Luiza Montejo for five cents in payment for a cup of chili-sauce which she had sent Nan as a gift some days before.

"I opine that our popularity is on the wane," said Nan dryly as she laid the coin in that lady's outstretched hand. "In fact, if straws show which way the wind blows, I predict that a storm is coming."

Mrs. Gallagher, on her sheepskin with her knees drawn to her chin, made no reply.

It was a small matter, it seemed to Nan, to have caused such feeling, but at that time and in that village it required but a small matter to arouse in the Mexicans the always smoldering hatred of the *Americanos*.

Therefore, in view of the prevailing unfriendliness, Nan was surprised to see Doña Marianna Apedaca whip her spindling leg over the bars which served as a gate before Nan's end of the dobe, and to note that although the thermometer registered a trifle

short of one hundred in the shade, Doña Marianna's solemn countenance was framed in her best blanket-shawl, which fact at once proclaimed it a visit of import.

When she had settled herself on her heels, with her back braced comfortably against the wall, in preference to the chair which Nan offered her, she introduced the topics which were always discussed as a matter of form before the real object of a visit was disclosed.

“*Muy viento*,” said the Doña Marianna profoundly as she produced a tobacco sack from the capacious pocket of her vivid green skirt.

“Yes, much wind,” Nan agreed with equal profundity.

“*Muy caliente*.” Doña Marianna twisted a cigarette with immense gravity.

“Very hot,” Nan assented.

“*Muchas moscas*.” The caller wagged her head.

“Many flies,” Nan assented to the deplorable fact.

The demands of local etiquette having been satisfied, the visitor paused impressively and

then demanded ingenuously, Mrs. Gallagher translating:

“The *señorita* will attend a *baile*, yes? How much money will the *señorita* donate toward the dance music? Twenty dollars, maybe?”

Nan could not suppress a smile. The neat little plan to have a dance at her expense was rather transparent, since the entire cost of the gifted schoolmaster’s orchestra for an evening was but ten dollars, as she happened to know. Nan considered. If the injured feelings of *Las Rubertas* could be assuaged for this modest sum she was disposed to give it. Also it might buy immunity from their thieving.

“It is a pleasure,” she said with an unction truly Spanish, “to be permitted to contribute toward the enjoyment of my many good friends in *Las Rubertas*.”

The reply lost nothing of its irony when interpreted by Mrs. Gallagher.

Doña Marianna blinked her solemn eyes, but took the money which Nan produced and departed with a haste which, to phrase it mildly, was unceremonious.

Immediately the news that the *baile* was assured spread throughout the village and reached the most remote family within a radius of one hundred and fifty miles.

It was the one topic of conversation in dobes which nestled in lonely *bosques*, and tumble-down huts huddling in sun-baked arroyos, while it is no exaggeration to say that the whole of Las Rubertas was aquiver.

They chortled at the thought that a gringo was paying for their pleasure; for, like other inferior races, the low-caste Mexicans invariably mistake generosity for weakness, and Nan, in thinking to buy immunity from their thieving, was reckoning upon persons who as a class are devoid of gratitude.

Nan watched the preparations with interest, though she had no thought of going, nor did she believe she was expected. There was now the washing of heads, lathered with soap-root in the front yards, the scurrying to and fro between houses and across the street, while dreadful sounds issued from the schoolmaster's dobe where the orchestra practised each night.

Also, Nan observed that the hostile attitude

of her erstwhile friends had become merely contemptuous amusement. She saw now that she was laughed at for her gift.

Nan had no thought that the coming dance would interest Ben, who looked down superciliously upon all things Mexican; but in this she was mistaken.

Pleasures were few and fifty miles was only a scamper when there were music and a dance at the end.

The date of the *baile* had hardly been set before, in some mysterious fashion, every cowboy in the L.X. outfit knew it, though he carefully refrained from mentioning it until negotiations for certain needed articles of wearing apparel were entered into and the deal consummated. The first to act was Joe Brindell, who took more than a passing pride in his personal appearance upon occasions of the kind. On the whole he considered himself rather a "dressy" person when the function warranted it.

Sauntering up to Kansas Ed he inquired with elaborate carelessness:

"Have you ever thought of sellin' that pink shirt of yours, Kansas?"

"Well, no," returned the owner of the coveted shirt with equal innocence, "can't say that I had. Why?"

"I was just wonderin' what for a cash value you'd put on a shirt like that."

Kansas considered.

"I couldn't rightly say off-hand just what I would hold that shirt at."

Mr. Brindell, speculatively:

"I b'leeve I'd look good in pink. Maybe I'll write off and git me one."

"No use doin' that—they ain't another shirt like that in the world—not exactly that same color, so they told me up in Coffeeville where I bought it."

"I suppose they took the gent what made that shirt and shovelled his brains out so he couldn't never make another," said Mr. Brindell dryly.

"It's a rare color all right; I've wore it considerable and I never see one like it. People kind a pick me out to look at when I got it on."

"Robin's-aig blue is a nice color for a shirt," observed Brindell reminiscently. "I mind how good I looked in one that was stole

off me by a son-of-a-gun from Roswell. I fol-lered him twenty mile."

"It's hard to keep anything fit to wear in a cow-camp," agreed Kansas, "where half the outfit is nothin' but petty thieves. I mind how bad I felt when I lost three good silk handkerchiefs that same way. I took 'em off a dude's neck while he was asleep and then some skunk robbed me."

"If you don't set no great store by that shirt, Kansas, I wouldn't mind givin' you five beans for it." Carelessly, "I kinda took a fancy to it."

The prairie Shylock shook his head.

"Fact is, Joe, I been holdin' that shirt back to be buried in. The way things happen sudden out here it's a good scheme to have one good suit by you."

"Of course," replied Mr. Brindell haughtily, realizing that he was playing the mouse to Kansas Ed's cat, "of course t'aint my aim to jew a feller out of his shroud, but as far as that goes," he scrutinized Kansas Ed's unprepossessing visage critically, "you'd be jest as good-lookin' a corp' and more natural, with your coat-collar turned up."

"I might think it over if you'd throw in that navvyho saddle-blanket," reflected Kansas.

Joe Brindell hesitated, then, shortly:

"All right; gimme the shirt."

"And," with a look of cunning, "agree to do a warshin' for me the next time you do yours."

"Shan't I jest make over my wages to you and bind myself to saddle your horse and take it off your hands when you rides in? Between times I could darn your socks and keep your clothes mended up. Say," ominously, "I ain't no pauper jest because I don't happen to have a shirt. When I starts to take in warshin' t'wont be for a Kansan! Ketch that?"

"No offence meant," protested Kansas hastily. "'Twere jest a thought I had. Come over to the bunk-house and git the shirt whenever you want it."

"Looks like you got your head pecked that time, Joe," observed the cook, who had been an interested listener. "That blanket's worth eight dollars. I see you aims to attend the *baile*."

"Don't you?"

"I'd like to," the cook answered wistfully, "if I could dig me up a pair of socks sommeres."

"Ben Evans's warsh came home day 'fore yesterday," said Mr. Brindell significantly.

"Aw, he watches it too clost." The cook's tone was despondent. "Besides, he'd take them socks off'n me at the dance if he happened to see 'em."

"Do you know, Joe," he went on pensively, "we all has our ambitions. In every human heart they is an ambition if you can jest find it. Some is to kick up a gold mine, some is to waller in a sea of aigs—fraish aigs—some is to hold up a train and git away with it, some is to go to the Legislator, but mine is for socks!"

"A barrel of socks—a barrel of socks with toes and heels in 'em! If I could jest wake up in the mornin' and lie there on my piller sayin' to myself: 'Well, what will it be to-day, Clarence? Them pea-green beauties with the vines up the side, er the purple boys with the red stripes?' Say, wouldn't that be heaven, Joe?" The cook rolled his eyes in ecstasy.

"You're ravin', Clarence. You never come honest by six pairs of socks in all your life."

"I knows it," agreed the cook, humbly, "but I can wish, can't I?"

He added mysteriously: "Wishes come true sometimes."

"Yours won't. You been throwin' out them hints ever since I've knowed you—years now—and nothin' out of the ordinary ever happened to you unless might be that little of hot grease you pulled over on you."

"All the same," declared the cook plaintively, "maybe it'll pay you to be kind to me."

"I'll allus be kind to you, Clarence, so long as you let me have hot water and shave in the kitchen. By the way," carelessly, "have you heard Ben say whether he's goin' to the *baile*?"

"He hasn't took me into his confidence so far as that. Ben cuts quite a figger when he's dressed up."

Mr. Brindell looked gloomy. "Takin' ways with women is better nor gold nor silver."

The cook agreed with dark ambiguity:

"Right you are, and moth nor rust dothn't corrupt."

CHAPTER IX

“DROP THAT GUN!”

THE day of the *baile* the mail brought Nan a peremptory letter from her father. It said in part:

“You have carried your impossible escapade too far already; you must come home else I shall send some member of the family to stay with you until you are ready to return.”

Nan knew that he would keep his word and, unless assured of her speedy return, her brother, sister, perhaps her mother, would be sent somewhat in the capacity of guardian to, or keeper of, the mildly insane.

It would be sheer martyrdom to any of the family to share, even for a week, the picturesque life with its indolence and idleness which had gripped her so hard.

From the time of her arrival the days had slipped by with incredible swiftness. In the cool of the mornings she saddled her horse and followed the trails along the river, flush-

ing great coveys of quail, startling innumerable jack-rabbits from the sage-brush and their burrows, or wandered over the mesa listening to the mournful coo of the turtle-doves, and enjoying to the utmost the wonderful colorings of the plains and distant ranges.

Then, when the afternoon's sun beat down upon the sand of the river valley, Mrs. Gallagher sprinkled the dirt floor, closed the door, and Nan, like all of Las Rubertas, lay down upon her sheepskin couch until the coolness of evening crept in upon the blistering day.

She ate the tortillas which Mrs. Gallagher patted out between her hands, and assiduously cultivated a taste for the hot chili-sauce of which Mrs. Gallagher partook with such relish. In the evening she sauntered with the populace in the plaza, or sat in her own doorway listening to the roar of the Rio Grande and the tinkle of guitars.

But her father's letter meant more than the abandonment of the life which had laid a hypnotic spell upon her. It meant that she must come to some decision in regard to Ben.

She must either break with her family and marry him in spite of their opposition, or she must give him up entirely and return to the life from which she had fled.

She could not ask Ben to share it, that was certain. The idea filled her with dismay, and she was further perturbed to discover that her dismay arose chiefly from the thought of Ben's unfitness for such surroundings.

She squirmed mentally, to use a figure, at the picture of Ben running the gantlet of her argus-eyed family and his foregone failure to come within even hailing distance of their standards of culture and good breeding.

They would consider him, she winced as she admitted it, a kind of picturesque lout. They could never make allowances as she did for his mental limitations, for his crude ideas and expression of them, and sometimes, yes, sometimes for his raw selfishness and vanity.

No, he belonged here, in his own setting. To transplant him was out of the question; she never would subject him to their criticism. She could adapt herself to his life, she thought, but he could never become a part of, or at home in, the world to which she belonged.

It was a momentous question to decide, though it seemed easy enough when Ben was there and she was drawn to him by the attraction of his super-abundant vitality.

No, she would not go to the *baile*. She remained obdurate under Mrs. Gallagher's final plea, and was proof against the alluring strains of a Spanish waltz which the musicians played as they marched through the plaza to notify Las Rubertas that the ball was about to open.

So Mrs. Gallagher, with her black braids freshly oiled and redolent of bergamot, took her departure, to return almost immediately with the news that Ben Evans and Edith Blakely were riding in to attend the *baile*.

"Perhaps you go, now," and she looked at Nan keenly.

Nan did her best to reply indifferently:

"Oh, are they? No, I don't think I shall go."

Why had Ben not sent her word that he was coming to the dance, and why had he not asked *her*?

There was no mistaking the nature of the pang she felt, it was too sharp and as astonish-

ing to Nan as it was real. She was jealous—jealous of the girl from the Longhorn *bosque*! It was no easy matter to greet them without constraint when a little later they rode up to the bars.

"Why, ain't you going?" he asked in surprise.

"I hadn't thought of it," she replied coolly. "I supposed of course you'd be ready," he said in a disappointed tone.

"Yes?"

Ben had an uncomfortable feeling that somehow he had blundered.

Edith with feminine intuition understood.

"We planned to stop for you as soon as we decided to come." She emphasized the "we" elaborately.

Edith really liked Nan as Nan liked her, but on the impulse of the moment she could not resist the temptation to patronize Nan who had unconsciously given her so many wretched hours.

Nan's long eyelashes lay for just an instant on her cheek. But her eyes were enigmatic enough when she raised them squarely to Edith's and said sweetly:

"It was good of you both to include me."

"Aw, say you'll come?" Ben urged uneasily.

"Yes, I will, if you don't mind waiting," Nan replied in quick decision. And added laughingly: "It *will* be a lark, won't it?"

"I thought you wouldn't mind even if it did seem like second choice." Edith gave a nervous little laugh. She was not accustomed to being mean; but jealousy has a way of forming acids in the sweetest natures.

"Not at all, so long as it only *seems* so." Nan was still able to smile.

Nan had in her nature a great deal of something very like chivalry, a masculine sense of justice, a desire to be fair, and this quality would have prevailed in all her intercourse with Edith had not the girl so frankly shown her claws.

Ben was not too astute, but it required little discernment to see that Edith was making more of their appearance together than the occasion warranted. Even while it made him uncomfortable, his vanity was flattered by it and, as always in Edith's society, he had an exalted sense of importance.



"I THOUGHT YOU WOULDN'T MIND EVEN IF IT DID SEEM LIKE SECOND CHOICE." EDITH
GAVE A NERVOUS LITTLE LAUGH

When I ride fifty miles to have
my orthopedic foot I always take
it ^{an}
rest

He had not reasoned it out, but it was as true as the fact that he felt humble in Nan's presence. Nan awakened in him vague ambitions and dissatisfaction with himself and his life; she was a disturbing element, yet he was overweeningly proud of her open preference for him.

Edith untied a package from the back of her saddle and followed Nan into the dobe, where she shook out a gandy dancing dress. “Ben likes me better in this than anything,” she said complacently.

Nan vowed mentally that if the contents of her trunk could produce anything bizarre in color effects she would outdo the rainbow itself.

She owed Edith a debt of gratitude; she was not the person to forget that, but, because of Edith's attitude she reasoned, there must be some other way of liquidating the obligation than by meekly yielding her feminine prerogative to be admired.

Mrs. Gallagher, learning that Nan had changed her mind, hovered about to be sure that Nan did not fall short of what was expected of her in the matter of dress; and so,

puffing excitedly upon her cigarette, she watched each garment as it came from the trunk, and a glance at her face was sufficient to tell Nan whether or not it met with her approval.

As a matter of fact Mrs. Gallagher, who was both fond and inordinately proud of Nan, had boasted extensively of the splendor of Nan's wardrobe though it must be admitted she never had seen it.

She eyed a simple white frock with conspicuous coldness, but her eyes sparkled at a clinging lemon-colored gown with striking dashes of black velvet, while her delight approached rapture when Nan unearthed a pair of red slippers and stockings.

"But red and yellow!" protested Nan.

"Oh, very beautiful!" declared Mrs. Gallagher, and it was at her earnest solicitation that Nan wore coral beads and a large purple velvet bow in her hair. With these additional touches Mrs. Gallagher rocked to and fro in ecstasy.

"Your approval is most gratifying," laughed Nan. "It makes it worth the effort,"

and when she appeared before Ben he stared in round-eyed admiration.

"Gee!" he said, struggling for some appropriate expression. "Gee! you look like one of these here cactus flowers in spring."

Nan made a curtsy in appreciation of his compliment.

"You think," she asked archly, "that the Señorita Perfecta Torres will be only a dingy moth beside me?"

"She'll look like a horse-fly," Ben returned heartily, "alongside a butterfly."

Edith was silent. Her small moment of triumph was already a thing of the past. Ben never had told her that she looked like a flaming cactus flower in spring, or likened her to a butterfly.

All Las Rubertas was assembled in the rear of the Señor Apedaca's long dobe store building when Nan, Edith, Ben and Mrs. Gallagher arrived. A large space had been cleared of boxes and barrels, and the dirt floor well sprinkled to keep down the dust.

A platform had been built in the end of the room which the orchestra occupied, and the guests now sat on the benches ranged against

the wall, or on their individual sheepskins, listening in respectful silence to the tuning of the instruments.

Señor Apedaca, portly, and every inch a personage in the only derby hat in the county, moved about turning the three kerosene lamps to their very highest notch, flicking invisible dirt from the polished reflectors with his pocket handkerchief, and flinging water from a basin with his finger-tips upon spots which to his critical eye needed a trifle more, a mere suspicion of moisture to lay the dust, and all with a large and capable air, which made Doña Marianna rear back in pride.

Doña Marianna wore her famous filigree cross of silver and her justly celebrated gown of chintz, while the Señorita Perfecta Torres was prepared to struggle to retain her supremacy as the belle of Las Rubertas in the creation of green and yellow which first brought El Paso to local notice.

Nor was their best too good for the innumerable Fuentes, Ramons and Montejos who, with bracelets jingling and brass rings to their knuckles, presented a solid phalanx of

amiable and receptive feminity coyly bidding for attention.

Nan burst upon this assembly like a bird of paradise. The movements of Señor Apedaca no longer attracted attention; the scraping of the school-master's violin fell upon deaf ears, while bile was suddenly disseminated throughout the system of the belle of Las Rubertas.

Fat señoritas whose days were over, looked at Nan in sullen curiosity, while their swarthy consorts shot her bold or surreptitious glances of admiration.

Nan and her party, which included Mrs. Gallagher in her blanket, took her seat upon a bench apparently as unconscious of the concentrated gaze as though she were alone.

All was in readiness, but the great moment had not arrived until the floor manager, having previously given each male dancer a number, took his place in the center of the floor and designated those who were to choose partners for the coming waltz or quadrille.

The floor-manager of a *baile* is supreme, and to ignore his commands is a serious breach of etiquette, if not an insult.

But who could ignore Ignacio Bojarques?

Certainly no unattached woman in Las Ruber-tas could be indifferent to this dashing beau. With his oiled and scented hair, a row of perfect teeth flashing beneath a fascinating mustache, a pair of bold and roving eyes, dapper grace and a genius for meeting all social exigencies, Ignacio Bojarques was the last man to lurk bashfully in the shadow of obscurity.

Therefore, all things considered, it is small wonder that a thrill of suppressed excitement was felt throughout the ballroom when this important figure raised his hand imperiously for silence.

But before he could speak, the jingling of spurs and the scuffling of feet diverted the attention of the guests, and directed all eyes to the door, where they beheld the L.X. outfit arriving in a body, breathless, with color high from haste, and dressed to the last notch in gay silk neckerchiefs and tallowed boots.

The Mexicans frowned perceptibly, but the faces of their women lighted with covert smiles of welcome. The socially gifted floor-manager advanced with expressions of pleasure, which his eyes belied, and requested

them with velvet firmness to lay their so large six-shooters in the woodbox until such time as he, the floor-manager, should, with so great regret, see them depart.

The cowboys' looked at one another uncertainly, suspicion written on each face.

"I feels kind of necked without my gun," demurred Joe Brindell.

"Naked!" declared the cook, "'tain't modest, I says."

The floor-manager waited politely, but resolutely.

"We might as well humor the little cuss," whispered Kansas Ed. "We kin git 'em quick if any ruckus starts."

Consequently the six-shooters were unstrapped and stacked reluctantly in the woodbox.

"I feel about as safe as rompin' with a bunch of hyeners," grumbled Joe Brindell, who was not the least conspicuous person present in his pink shirt and a flaming red handkerchief draped jauntily about his neck.

The thanks of Ignacio Bojarques held much gratitude as, after having given each newcomer a number, he turned away.

The first dance was a quadrille and to Ben's chagrin his number was not among those called, but the floor-manager, having opened the ball with all due ceremonies, stood flashing his teeth before Nan, frankly conscious of the honor he was doing her.

"Isn't it fun!" whispered Nan, while her eyes sparkled with mischief as the "catch" of Las Rubertas led her away.

There was nothing in Ben's expression to indicate that he regarded it in that light.

Joe Brindell slid into the seat Nan had left vacant.

"You look kinda lonesome, Ben," he jeered, "settin' here all by yourself like a wall-flower. In fact you look some sour."

"I *feel* sour!" Ben declared wrathfully. "If that there chicken king"—in slurring reference to Ignacio Bojarques's occupation of poultry raising—"don't call some Americano numbers next time I'll tell him where to get off at."

"It does look a little p'inted," Joe admitted, "but you don't want to forget that our principal argamints is cached over there in the wood-box. We hadn't ought to have give

’em up; it’s takin’ chances in this kind of a crowd. Or any kind of a crowd for that matter; you never can tell what kind of a play is comin’ up when you’re out in society. The coldest-blooded killin’ I ever see was at a Sunday School picnic in Missouri.”

But Ben was staring disconsolately at Nan, who, the center of attraction, was moving lightly and with animation through the figures of the quadrille in striking contrast to the solemn jog of the other dancers.

“How do you ‘spose they gits ‘em so white?” Joe Brindell made the inquiry of the world in general, but the cook, who had come up, answered.

“Hands, you talkin’ about?” Nan was giving her finger-tips to Señor Pedro Apedaca at the time. “They soaks ‘em in buttermilk and plasters ‘em with bran. Them stylish ladies back east,” explained the cook kindly—“sets more’n half a day with their faces and hands plastered with bran.”

“Shoo,” replied Joe Brindell, impressed and interested by the information—“ain’t women the proud ones!”

“Has she noticed your shirt yet?”

"She ain't spoke about it, Clarence."

"I doubt if she sees it," opined the cook unfeelingly, "for your face is so red you can't tell where your skin leaves off and your shirt begins."

"Pink ain't my color anyhow. I more'n half wish," said Brindell disconsolately, "that I had my Navvyho back. Looks to me like this greaser outfit is goin' to give us fellers the double cross."

"They wouldn't dast!" But in spite of the cook's sanguine opinion they did "dast," and when the numbers were called for the second time there was not an American dancer on the floor.

"Is this here slight a accident or a insult?" inquired Mossy Green who "placeder" over in Bay Horse Gulch. "Because," continued Mossy, deftly running the point of his jack-knife between the thick soles of his miner's shoes and the uppers to remove traces of clay, "if it's a meant insult I hopes it doesn't happen again."

"I jest put a fine aidge on my ax this afternoon," observed the cook in apparent irrelevance, as he ran his eye contemplatively over

the ramshackle building, "wisht I'd brought it."

"When I rides fifty mile to shake my Methody foot I aims to shake it," continued Mossy in growing wrath. He added: "Wisht Riley was here. He can handle these greasers like a steam-shovel, and his fist—they'd rather be hit with a drill."

"He's freightin' between here and Hope-dale. Say"—the cook suddenly drew one corner of his mouth down and conversed from it in a whisper of exultation—"did you see the look that señorita give me?"

Mossy jammed his jack-knife into his pocket and returned sourly:

"I kin see she's laffin, at somethin'."

Unperturbed by such open envy Clarence sat from that moment with his eyes boldly glued upon Señorita Perfecta Torres, and as he stared the cook's inflammable heart took fire.

Desire quickly changed to purpose, and when the numbers for the third dance were called with the Americans still excluded, the cook, with a gallant daring none had suspected he possessed, slipped his arm about the waist

of the coquettish Señorita Perfecta and whirled her from the very embrace of her Mexican partner.

Inspired by the cook's example, the L.X. outfit, as though moved by a common impulse, each seized in his arms the woman nearest and followed the cook in a dizzy whirl. Fat señoritas, feeling themselves once more objects of conquest, laid their heads quite contentedly upon broad American breasts, which position it is tacitly conceded is infinitely preferable to hanging a chin over a five-foot shoulder.

The violin shrieked, the guitar whanged, the accordion wheezed its loudest; whirling skirts displayed ankles not too slender, and the dust rose in clouds, while glowering husbands and lovers but added piquancy to the situation.

"Looks to me like we ought to git them guns." Mossy Green's finger-tips barely met in the singular hold he had about Doña Marianna Apedaca's ample waist.

"Don't bother me," panted Clarence, as he spun by rolling his eyes in ecstasy, "I haven't time."

Momentarily the resentment deepened in the sullen faces of the Mexicans who leaned against the wall, twirling their mustaches or fingering brass watch-chains.

Ben himself had passing twinges of uneasiness as he noted their ill-temper and increasing jealousy; but with the cowboy's characteristic carelessness and his share of the overweening American self-confidence, he dismissed the feeling with the thought that although they were outnumbered three to one, there were enough Americans present to cope with twice that number if necessary.

Then the floor-manager signaled the orchestra to stop; the cook commanded it to continue. The floor-manager repeated his signal, and the cook promptly lifted his hand and cuffed the oiled and plastered head of the village beau.

Instantly there was confusion. Both Americans and Mexicans made a rush for the wood-box, but the Mexicans acted together, as though it were a prearranged maneuver.

Blocking the way of the Americans they reached it first, with the result that not a single American obtained possession of a

gun, though the Mexicans fell before their blows like tenpins. For a moment they stared at each other blankly. Then above the tumult, the shrieking of women and the scrambling of the old and timid to escape, rose Ignacio Bojarques's voice, shrill with excitement:

“Shove up your hands, gringos!” His gun covered Ben Evans in particular.

Anger and chagrin were ludicrously mingled in the cowboys' faces. The Mexicans had them at their mercy, and the Americans knew that, in their hysterical excitement, they might carry out the threat which the menacing gun-barrels implied.

Slowly, as though the action gave them actual physical pain, their hands were lifted above their heads, and Ben Evans's was the last reluctant pair to go up.

There was a strange silence, a hesitating, even embarrassed silence, for the Mexicans, having the advantage, did not for the instant know what to do with it. They dared not shoot the cowboys down in cold blood for they were only too familiar with the swift vengeance of the Americans, and they were afraid to let them go. Nor did they want to

let them off so easily. The occasions when they had such an advantage as this were too rare.

Finally the sight of the dapper village beau, who would have been as a rat to a terrier had he had him in his clutches, covering him with his own gun became too much for Ben Evans's self-control.

“You infernal greaser”—he yelled the epithet with insulting emphasis—“I'll make you sweat for this!”

Epiphanio Montejo, fairly safe behind a bench in the corner, shrieked shrilly:

“Shoot the American pigs!”

Other voices took up the cry, until it became a high-pitched, hysterical chorus:

“Shoot the dogs!”

Ben Evans stood quite still, but he dropped his hands.

“Oh, Ben!”

For the first time he heard Nan's trembling voice behind him.

“If they begin to shoot, stoop low and run for the door,” he said quietly.

His jaw was rigid, and there was no fear in the steely eyes he fixed on Ignacio Bojar-

ques, only anger—the white anger of the Anglo-Saxon. He looked the personification of physical courage as he stood there, and at the moment Ignacio Bojarques feared his vengeance more than the law. Just for an instant his glance wavered, then he lowered the gun on a level with Ben's heart.

“You pull that trigger, you Mexican mongrel, and every mother's son of you will swing in the cottonwoods!”

Bojarques's mouth stretched in a grimace rather than a grin, and in a kind of desperation he took aim.

“Drop that gun!” The ringing command turned every head to the doorway.

A tall young man—a stranger in modish clothes—determined, alert, covered Ignacio Bojarques with a gun as businesslike as his own.

Nan sat down weakly upon the nearest bench.

“Bob!”



"DROP THAT GUN!" THE RINGING COMMAND TURNED EVERY HEAD TO THE DOORWAY

CHAPTER X

BOB FIGHTS IT OUT

RILEY, the freighter, now shoulder to shoulder, with his passenger, bellowed:

“Git!”

They stepped inside and cleared the doorway for the exit of the Mexicans, who, in obedience to the familiar voice, flung down their guns and fled upon each other's heels like a band of frightened sheep.

Through the settling dust the Americans looked into one another's faces, grinning foolishly.

“I feel like a feller what's been treed by a pole-kitty, or some such dangerous varmint. Serves us right for gittin' careless.” Mossy Green picked up Señor Apedaca's crushed derby and poked it into shape with his fist as he made the shame-faced admission. Ben Evans, with a mixture of feelings, was watching the stranger make his way among the overturned benches to Nan's side. She met him with an outstretched hand.

"Are you glad to see me, Nan?" He searched her face eagerly, for the hope had grown that he might find something more than friendship in her welcome.

"So very glad, Bob," she answered, "and so amazed!"

A shadow crossed his face; there was only the frank cordiality of comradeship in her tone.

"I expected to surprise you," he returned, "but scarcely anticipated being so surprised myself. The situation was—awkward."

"Your coming as you did was exactly like one of these 'just-in-the-nick-o'-time' stories." Nan smiled up at him gratefully, and he returned the smile with yearning in his eyes. In her bizarre dress she looked more adorable than ever.

Then she presented him to Edith, who gave him her hand shyly and beckoned Ben.

Bob brought with him strongly the atmosphere of the world from which he had come. His well-fitting, inconspicuous clothes, his modulated speech, his poise of manner, bore the stamp of another environment and unconsciously Nan now looked at her present

surroundings through the eyes with which she knew he saw.

Her pride was great, and she was more anxious than she realized that Ben should appear well before Bob. She wanted him to approve of him—in other words, to see him as she saw him, which was through the rosy glow of romance.

As Ben came toward them there flashed through Nan's mind the wish that Ben would eschew the purple scarfs, of which he seemed to have an unlimited supply, and his slight swagger, the result largely of his high-heeled boots, somehow made her uncomfortable.

To the cook's facetious—"Looks like Riley's dude is cuttin' you out, Ben," he had retorted curtly:

"Shut up! You stirred up trouble enough for one night"; but the implication rankled and evidenced itself in the stiffness with which he extended his hand to meet Bob's friendly grasp.

The moment was strained in spite of Nan's best efforts, and her cheeks grew warm under Bob's look of quizzical inquiry at the silent antagonism which Ben's manner displayed.

A singular attitude to assume toward one who had perhaps saved his life, or at least averted a clash in which he was almost certain to have been hurt. Bob's mystification was entirely real. Ben made no reference to Bob's timely interference, and Nan, in the hope that Ben might be reminded of the omission, asked Bob how he had learned of their predicament.

"A child," said Bob—"a little girl who was beside herself at your danger, Nan."

"Rosario Richards, bless her heart!"

"She could scarcely speak in her excitement. She had been looking at the dance through the window, it seems."

"But why are you here—you of all persons—reeking with effeteness one may say? Surely you are not the guardian with whom I've been threatened?"

Bob shook his head.

"No such luck. I'm here only for a few days, then I'm off for a try at big game."

Mr. Robert Ellison had no notion of explaining that she was the sole cause of his presence there; that her hint of Spiser and his bogus hospitality, and afterward her long

silence, had troubled him until under this pretext he had come West.

Ben shifted restlessly during the conversation, giving only half attention to Edith, who made timid and despairing attempts to interest him.

“Shan’t we better be going, Nan?” he interrupted in a tone of proprietorship which made Nan’s color rise again as she saw Bob’s eyes widen ever so slightly in surprise.

“Perhaps; obviously, the dance is over.” She took the scarf he handed her, with an embarrassed laugh.

Bob helped Edith find her wrap and offered her his arm with a gentle deference which made her everlastingly his friend and ally.

There was no longer any mystery to Bob about Ben’s constraint, his unbending manner, his downright rudeness. He was in love with Nan—he was childishly jealous and unable to conceal it. And Nan—did she care—was she seriously attached to this crude, picturesque man of the mesas and prairies?

With all her adventurous spirit and romantic notions, he always had thought of Nan as particularly level-headed, incapable of do-

ing anything really *outré*, and for the moment the discovery of this love-affair affected him as though she had announced her intention of marrying Rupert, the coachman, whose last name was Higgins.

As he bade them all good night there was nothing in the easy friendliness of his manner to indicate the shock which the revelation had been to him. But he was anxious to be alone, to think it out, to readjust his plans if possible, and his point of view.

All night he lay awake on the hard cornhusk mattress in the one extra bed in the dobe of Riley, the freighter, trying to realize how life would seem if it no longer included Nan.

With a peculiar obstinacy, a characteristic tenacity of purpose for which Nan did not give him credit, he always had clung to the belief that in the end she would marry him—after she had had her “fling,” as she called it—if he waited patiently for the time when she should learn her own mind and heart.

In spite of the attention Nan had received, there never had been any other man who had figured with sufficient prominence to seriously disturb him in this belief.

In his efforts to be just, Bob told himself over and over that it was unfair and un-American to urge it against Ben that his sphere was so radically different from Nan's and his own. He tried hard to think of this courageous, handsome but ill-mannered cow-puncher as a social equal, but his life-long training was against it. He failed dismally, and to scourge himself for his undemocratic prejudices he dwelt humbly upon his own short-comings. He told himself that he was a dawdler, a useless member of society and perhaps a coward. He was not sure that he would have had the courage to have stood up there as Ben had done and defied an hysterical Mexican to fill him full of holes. Also he was afraid of snakes—they made him shudder, shiver—and his antipathy for spiders was nearly as strong.

He was helpless, too, he told himself; he was not resourceful and able to cope with emergencies—like Riley, for instance. Riley could shoe a horse and mend a wagon with a twist of baling-wire and cook and tell how fast a horse was travelling from the track he

left and—well, the versatile Riley was a wonder.

In his depression and humility he could not think of a single quality he had to recommend him to an intelligent girl.

Yet after reviewing every phase of the situation and admitting meekly his own inadequacy, he found when morning came that he was no more resigned to the relinquishment of the future he had planned with Nan than before.

“I don’t want to be a cad and force myself upon her if she really knows her own mind,” he said miserably to the reflection which looked at him from the mirror, “but I can’t just take myself off and quit until I’m sure beyond the question of a doubt that she loves him and has no use on earth for me.

“I’m not a noble hero. I’d run like thunder if one of these long-horned steers chased me, and any horse that pitches could probably lay me on the back of my neck, but I do believe I’m man enough to take my medicine and help smooth the way for her if she can’t be happy with any one but this prairie knight.”

CHAPTER XI

A RUSTLER IS CORNERED

“You are not nearly so supercilious and superior as I was afraid you would be,” Nan told Bob when, one afternoon, he rode to the bars to tell her that he was off for the Long-horn *bosque* to join Ben Evans and ride the range with him in that vicinity.

“Good!” Bob exclaimed in mock delight. “I’m more than repaid for any slight—er—well—inconveniences I may suffer under the hospitable roof of my friend Riley. Perhaps you don’t know that Riley and I ‘aim’ to wash to-morrow if we can find out who borrowed his wash-board.”

Nan laughed immoderately. She suspected that in private Bob made wry faces over the salt pork and sour-dough bread which was Riley’s daily fare, but in public Bob spoke of Riley’s domestic accomplishments with an enthusiasm so nearly genuine that it deceived all save Nan.

But she liked him for it. The good nature

with which he adapted himself to the people and surroundings so utterly foreign to his own was a constant surprise to her. She was still laughing as Bob rode away, but there was approval in her dancing eyes.

He sighed and his face set in lines of grimness as he lifted his horse to a gallop. He was her comrade, a good chum, that was all.

The suggestion that he should ride the range that afternoon with Ben Evans was his own. Ben merely had acquiesced with as much cordiality as he could summon.

Unaccustomed as he was to concealing his moods and his feelings, the best he could give Bob was a grudging civility. He realized with sullen and awkward resentment that this agreeable stranger, always so courteous and at his ease, was cast in a different mold from himself.

He used words which Ben had never heard; he was familiar with subjects that were vague as dreams in the cowboy's mind, and they, Nan and this stranger, had so much in common while he was an outsider.

He was irritable from a smoldering jealousy when he saw them together, but never

for a moment self-disparaging. Unlike Bob, he never thought of his shortcomings with humility, because he did not see that he had any.

Bob's wider knowledge made Ben petulant, but never envious or regretful that he lacked it. He regarded it as superfluous and unimportant save for the single reason that thereby he claimed a larger share of Nan's conversation.

And Bob bore Ben's surly manner with patience for Nan's sake, and because he wished to learn exactly what manner of man he was to whom Nan might have given what was to him the most precious thing in the world—her love.

“Won't you 'light and rest yoah hat?’” inquired Mrs. Blakely affably, as Bob rode up to the stockade where he and Ben had arranged to meet. “Clytie, run open the gate for the gennelman.”

“Regina, run open the gate for the gennelman.”

“Luna——”

Ben rose from the log at the wood-pile

where he had been sitting with Edith and untied his horse.

“I’ll keep an eye skinned for your cattle, Edie, but I reckon it’s not much use. They’re a long way from this range by now.”

“Come soon again, won’t you, Ben?” Her voice was plaintive with its note of entreaty.

“When I can.

“She doesn’t look very happy,” Bob commented as they rode away.

“They’re losin’ lots of stock.” Ben added: “Edie’s a good girl.”

When they were out of hearing Mrs. Blakely, with a display of energy so rare as to startle, took Miss Clytie Blakely by each shoulder and shook her with a vigor which threatened to dislocate her neck.

“Why didn’t you do as I tol’ you and open that gate?”

“Wha’ for?”

“Wha’ for! Wha’ for! Ain’t the stars and the kyards, and the bumps on yoah haid, and yoah pa’m all said you was goin’ to have a chanst to ketch a rich husband! And now you let him slip through yoah fingers and you goin’ on sixteen and ready to come out!”

“Lemme be!” howled the débutante. “He never looked at me!”

“Never took his eyes off’n you.”

Which assertion was quite true, as, through a gap in the stockade Bob had watched, with fascinated eyes, the endeavors of the hope of the Blakely family to expectorate through the space between her front teeth.

“Let her alone, mother,” said Edith impatiently, “haven’t I told you he’s in love with Nan.”

Mrs. Blakely reached for her gum under the lamp shelf and chewed in an abandonment of despair.

“Is the whole worl’ in love with that Nan?” she asked sarcastically. “I couldn’t see nothin’ to her myself.”

Edith made no answer, and she demanded:

“Have you used that charm? Did you sprinkle him yet?”

“I’ve had no good chance.”

“You’ll get him.” Hope never died in Mrs. Blakely’s sanguine bosom, and she now shook a prophetic finger. “He’ll be back here inside of two days when that charm gets workin’.”

"I hope you're right, mother," Edith replied wistfully.

Several miles from the Longhorn *bosque* Ben drew rein and looked long and intently at a horseman in pursuit of a cow and calf.

"That ain't Blakely," he said finally. "Like as not it's one of them dog-gone cattle thieves, and he's got his dog-gone nerve to work as bold as this."

Cow, calf, and rider were lost to sight in an arroyo, and Ben, as he kept his eyes on the spot where they had disappeared, mechanically drew his rifle from its leather sheath where it swung beneath his leg.

The cow reappeared, threw up her head and disappeared again into the draw.

"She's bellowin' for her calf; he's roped it. Come on." Ben urged his horse to a gallop. "If he's seen us it's not likely we can get up to him for he'll throw down on us and I don't aim to get punctured for a thirty-dollar cow. But we can get close enough to find out who's doin' this rustlin'." He added: "There's something uncommon familiar about the way that feller sets in the saddle."

Bob and Ben galloped in silence through

the heavy sand, slowing up as they neared the arroyo. Ben chuckled:

"I don't believe that *hombre* saw us; he was too busy gettin' the rope on the calf to take a look around. We'd 'a' seen his head a bobbin' up by this time if he was expectin' us, and a wavin' of us off. Of course," he added, "there's a chance that he's brandin' his own stock."

Their horses' feet made no sound in the sand, and they rode to the edge before they checked them, where they stood looking down at Kansas Ed industriously fanning a small collection of sticks into flame while he kept an eye on the cow, who had more than half a mind to charge him. The brand she wore was Blakely's.

"I thought so." Ben nodded grimly, then called: "Hello there!"

Instinctively Kansas Ed's hand sought his hip. Then his first startled look changed to a grin, which was half embarrassment, half bravado.

"Oh, hello! Kinda got the drop on me, Ben."

Ben replied dryly:

“Kinda. Just turn that calf loose, Kansas.”

The rustler made no motion to obey.

Ben urged his horse forward. It bunched its feet, bent its hind legs, and slid down the side of the arroyo.

“Have you quit taking orders?”

Kansas Ed answered stubbornly:

“I’ve got my orders.”

“You never got any orders from me to brand other people’s stock. I’m not the foreman of a bunch of rustlers yet. You’re fired, right now! Take your blankets, get your time and vamose. *Sabe?*”

“I *sabe*, all right,” the cowboy sneered, “but you can’t fire me!”

“We’ll settle that when we get back to the ranch, but I can make you cut that calf loose or ride all night with a couple of turns of rope around your waist.”

Kansas Ed saw that Ben was right in that particular, and sullenly obeyed. The side-long look he cast at Ben as he rode away was full of malice, and Ben felt that his boast was true, that he could not fire the rustling cowboy, though stealing daily from Ben’s friends.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. GALLAGHER'S SECRET

SINCE the episode at the L.X. ranch, which was still a nightmare to Nan, she had seen nothing of Spiser, though she had heard much. New tales of his arrogance, of his brutality to horses, his political methods, and his dishonest transactions, were coming constantly to her ears.

She had grown to think of him in much the same way in which the little Blakelys regarded him—as an ogre who “ate ‘em alive,” and with each fresh story of his lack of honor, her gratitude toward Mrs. Gallagher and Fritz Poth increased.

Of all the people who mentioned his name, it seemed to Nan that Mrs. Gallagher was the only one who had no secret fear of him. Even Ben seemed to shrink unaccountably from incurring his displeasure.

With a man of Spiser’s temperament and prodigious vanity, she wondered sometimes that he had let her escape so easily—that he

had not made her pay for the mortification of being thwarted—that with all his resources for wrecking vengeance upon those who offended him he had not made her feel, in some small way at least, the weight of his wrath. Or was he merely biding his time?

For the first time in days she was thinking of him as she sat in the shade of the dobe waiting for Bob to return from his ride with Ben. She had a new feeling of security in the knowledge that Bob was there. She would not admit it to herself, but Ben did not inspire in her any such sense of safety.

She had not forgotten, though she wished to, their first meeting when he had refused his direct aid because of Spiser.

Mrs. Gallagher had gone to the ranch of Ignacio Bojarques, who did not permit his personal animosities to interfere with business and, though he persistently refused to see Nan in the street, he was "mos' happy" to sell her eggs.

It was coincidence, perhaps, that Nan should have Spiser so strongly in her mind and, hearing a脚步, glanced around the corner to see him coming toward her with

his rolling walk, looking almost like a gentleman in white duck clothes and a Panama hat.

"How d'do?" he said with curt affability and sat down on the bench beside her.

His assurance angered Nan immeasurably.

Señor Spiser craned his neck and inquired humorously:

"The old catamount is away?"

Nan looked at him in cold silence.

"Haven't you anything to say to me after a sixty-mile drive and half killin' my horses to get here?" He looked at her with desire in his eyes. Nan arose.

"Haven't I made it quite clear to you that I have nothing to say to you, now or at any time?"

"Look here"—he ignored the rebuff and reached for her hand instead.

"What did you jump the traces for? You're an obstinate little devil, but, by George! you suit me down to the ground."

Nan was nearly choked with rage as she wrenched herself free.

"Isn't it possible to make you understand that you have misjudged me? Can't you see

that your familiarity is insulting, that you, yourself, are odious to me?"

"Odious?"

The word stung his vanity. He, too, arose. Nan repeated it. "Exactly—*odious!*"

For a moment he was at a loss for a reply; then he sneered:

"I am not so handsome as my foreman, to be sure." He noted her heightened color with satisfaction. The rumors were true, then? She was interested in Ben Evans. The attraction was not wholly on his side, as he had fancied. This he was glad to know.

"I presume," Nan's eyes narrowed as she said slowly and distinctly, "there never yet was a woman who tolerated a bounder that did not pay dearly for it. I have paid well for my brief acquaintance with you."

"Look here, little girl—" Spiser's tone was conciliating; he was not ready to admit failure.

Nan half turned.

"Will you go or must I?"

Spiser studied her face a moment. Undoubtedly she was sincere. There was no woman's coquetry in her contemptuous eyes.

He turned all bully and, with his hands thrust deep in his trousers-pockets, his feet planted wide apart, stared at her in indescribable insolence.

“When I’m ready—my dear.”

He swaggered closer and again quickly caught her wrist when she would have gone.

“Señor Spiser forgets sometimes that he is a married man.”

Spiser dropped Nan’s arm as though it burned him, and whirled.

Mrs. Gallagher, her apron filled with eggs, stood like a statue regarding him with eyes which did, indeed, look like the eyes of the catamount he had called her and her moccasined feet had allowed her to approach with something of its stealth.

It seemed to Nan that Spiser quailed before the woman’s gaze.

“Look out, be careful!” His tone was a threat, but Nan detected the bravado in it and she was sure that in some way her strange protector held the whip-hand. And he was married—this was the secret, or a part of it, which explained Mrs. Gallagher’s power.

She knew his past, his wife—poor soul! Nan looked at him with curling lips.

“You talk too much for the good of your health, *mujer*.” Spiser stooped for his hat, which he had placed under the bench.

The woman’s eyes gleamed mockery at the warning, but she did not reply. Instead, she shrugged her gaunt shoulders under the blanket and stalked away.

Spiser was no longer swayed by passion when he left Nan’s dobe, but itched with an intense desire to humiliate her. She had wounded his vanity deeply, and he was vindictive to the finger-tips.

Spiser was an active enemy; he could not wait passively for circumstances to shape themselves, but he must needs shape them himself to suit his ends. And the thought now uppermost in his mind was how he could quickest and most effectively revenge himself upon Nan.

“I’ll see that she’s dealt more misery than she ever dreamed of,” he snarled as he untied his horses. “I’ll make her glad to get back to the place she came from, but first I’ll give her a real taste of the wild West.”

"Once more I have to thank you," said Nan gratefully.

The glitter had not yet faded from Mrs. Gallagher's eyes.

"He will not come back again, *chiquita*."

"You seem to know him well?"

"Why not?" said Mrs. Gallagher briefly.
"I'm his wife."

CHAPTER XIII

Rosario Gives Warning

SECRETLY, among those to be trusted, the word passed from mouth to mouth that the Americans in Las Rubertas were looked upon with ill-favor by Señor Spiser, that they could in no way look to him for protection, and that should any accident befall them the circumstances would not be investigated with too much thoroughness or the perpetrator of any mischief be prosecuted with great vigor.

This was enough for Las Rubertas. It understood Señor Spiser and his methods perfectly. Unwelcome strangers had often found it more convenient to move on.

The animosity of the women centered upon Nan, while the men could not forgive the intervention which had lost them the fight at the *baile*. They had no love for Riley, but they feared him, also they needed him, and at any rate he was mostly upon the road between Hopedale and Las Rubertas.

Therefore he was eliminated from their

whispered conversation, but the names of Nan and Bob figured frequently. The latter's civility they mistook, as usual, for weakness, and Nan— Bah! she was a woman! They had no definite plans, but they prepared for San Juan's day with more zest than usual.

Tubs of soap-root for a general hair-washing were put to soak in the front yards. The afternoon of the 23rd brought wagon-loads of guests from the outlying districts for every family. Crates of chickens, goats, and many kegs of home-made wine arrived.

Nan's dooryard was filled with the shrieking grandchildren of the Montejos, who stared and snickered as they passed, without a reprimand from their elders. Everywhere she felt the unfriendly atmosphere, and Mrs. Gallagher was as alert as a sheepdog with coyotes in the vicinity.

Bob saw her uneasiness and vaguely shared it as he sat with Nan for a time that evening listening to the guitars and wheezing accordions in the plaza, and to the sounds from the Monteojo end of the dobe of drinking and much laughter, which was good-natured enough as yet.

“Nan,” Bob asked suddenly and bluntly, “when are you going home?”

She answered as bluntly and with a touch of defiance, “I don’t know.”

They sat in silence for a time.

“Do you think, Nan”—he asked gently—“that you would be content here for long?—that the glamour would not wear off?”

“I love it—this life.”

“They are tremendously uneasy about you—the family.”

“So they’ve written. I’m threatened with a guardian if I don’t go home. I’ve asked for a month’s reprieve.”

“And at the end of that time you’ll go?”

“Or stay—for keeps.”

“Oh, Nan!” That was all. He arose quickly and said good night, adding in a voice which sounded unnatural from the effort it cost him to speak: “Be careful tomorrow; they may all be drunk.”

The celebration of San Juan’s day began long before daylight, and the Montejos were out by lantern-light killing the goats under Nan’s window; men, women, and children

shrieking with laughter at the struggles of the dying animals.

By the time the sun rose, the drinking and feasting was well under way. At ten o'clock the songs and laughter were boisterous, but still good-natured. All the village and its guests in gala-day attire were flocking toward the plaza.

It was Nan's custom to ride each morning, but to-day she hesitated because of Bob's warning, and, too, she noted Mrs. Gallagher's vigilance. The woman knew nothing definite, but the Indian in her sensed danger and, when Nan's restlessness became too great she viewed her preparations to ride with unqualified disapproval.

"I'll not go far—truly I'll not. Not out of sight of Las Rubertas. Besides what could happen to me in broad daylight?"

"Many things have happened to Americans where the mesquite grows thick and there is no one to hear a shot!"

"Listen!"—a roar went up from the plaza—"they are having a glorious time, and too busy with their games and themselves to

think of me. But I'll be back within the hour, just to relieve your mind."

Nan turned in the saddle and kissed her finger-tips lightly to her swarthy chaperon as she rode away.

She had been gone less than ten minutes when Rosario, running as for her life through Epiphanio Montejos's alfalfa field, looked with dismay in her eyes at the empty corral.

"The *señorita*!" Rosario wriggled through the window at the back of the dobe like an eel. "She is not here!"

Mrs. Gallagher waved her hand toward the plaza and Rosario began to cry.

"What you hear?" demanded Mrs. Gallagher.

"The Spain have lick the America!"

Mrs. Gallagher's face relaxed. Was that all? That was a small matter to cry about. She hunched her shoulders.

"I don't care."

"To-night they build big bonfire in the plaza to make glad. At first they talk they hamstring the *señorita*'s horse." Mrs. Gallagher stopped rolling a cigarette and turned her head quickly.

“I listen by the crack to Ignacio Bojarques’s talk. The señorita’s saddle-blanket look good on his horse, he say; then they laugh.

“But no, they will not hamstring the horse; it will be more pleasant to make the señorita fast on her horse and turn him loose on the mesa, and tie the new señor on his horse and drive him across the river, which is high with the big rain above.

“Maybe he swim, maybe no. It will be mos’ pleasant to see, Ignacio Bojarques, he say. The Mexican’s boss of the American now, everybody say.”

“You make no mistake!”

Rosario nodded, wisely: “I listen by the crack, señora. To-night when the bonfire is lighted and they are brave with the *vino*.”

“You can find the strange señor!”

“*Pronto! Muy pronto!*” Rosario’s eyes sparkled with resolution.

“Tell him to come here—*quick*.”

Rosario slipped through the window as she had come, and Mrs. Gallagher watched her as, half crouching, she ran swiftly through Epi-

phanio Montejos's alfalfa, circling cautiously to get back to the village square without being noticed.

Of a sudden she saw the child raise herself and throw both hands aloft as though in warning, while screaming wildly she ran toward the plaza.

CHAPTER XIV

AN INSULT AVENGED

EVERY person in Las Rubertas not actually bedridden was in the plaza that morning to drink and gossip with his friends, to view the sports and contests, and then—oh, glorious news!—to celebrate the victory of Spain over the pigs of Americans.

As Nan's horse ambled easily through the soft sand of the road leading into the square, she saw its sides lined with the old men, the women and the children of the village, and all the country round, while every youth who owned or could borrow a horse was a dashing *caballero*.

And anxious to attract attention to himself, each in his vanity spurred his horse deep, and held it hard with the cruel Mexican bit, that the bewildered animal in its pain might prance and cavort.

But a group of horsemen at the far end of the square seemed to be the center of interest, and they were being discussed with much ex-

cited gesticulation. They were making ready for a race, Nan thought, or for some feat of Mexican prowess, so she pulled her horse far to one side and rode at a leisurely gait into the plaza.

Instantly she more than divided attention with the horsemen at the other end, though she was a familiar sight on horseback to them all.

There was no friendliness in the rows of black eyes turned intently upon her; derision, mockery, scorn of the gringo, but no longer fear or respect. Had not the Spain lick the America? and had they not Juan Ospino's word for it? Nan heard their scoffing tones, then a jeer, a hoot as she passed, and her blood tingled. But there was only one thing for her to do, and that was to ride on with her head high and ignore the insults.

At a shrill command the horses grouped at the end of the plaza leaped forward. With a thunder of hoofs and their riders shrieking like madmen, they came headlong. In the center of the square the foremost swung downward from his saddle and made a frantic swoop with his outstretched hand at the bob-

bing head of a rooster buried to the neck in the sand.

The spectators hooted and howled their derision. The leader's face, dark with chagrin at his failure, grew still darker at their ridicule. He lifted his eyes to see Nan.

Inflamed with much wine, the sight of her at this moment of his failure maddened him and, with a frenzied yell, he swung his horse and rode straight at her, lashing and spurring furiously.

In the second that it took him to cover the distance between them, Nan recognized the malevolent face of Ignacio Bojarques. She read his purpose in his eyes before the horses crashed together. The impact of the oncoming horse against the shoulder of her own knocked its legs from under it, and horse and rider fell. Bojarques's horse staggered and went on.

Then the fallen horse, still dazed, struggled to its feet, but Nan did not rise. Of all the throng, only Bob, who had witnessed it from Riley's doorway, and little Rosario Richards, reckless in her fright for Nan, ran to the limp heap in the sand.

The avalanche of horsemen swept by, grinning, and their enjoyment was reflected in the faces of the spectators.

Bob, as pale as Nan herself, lifted her head and shoulders to his knee.

“Can you get me some water, Rosario?” His quiet voice was unsteady.

“*Pronto, señor!*” and she was off like a deer.

The flying horsemen had swept on unable yet to check their horses, leaving behind them a cloud of dust which had not settled when whoops in a different key—whoops which came only from lusty American throats—were heard on the road which led in to the square from the other side of the village.

The grins faded. Women gathered their children beneath their shawls and scuttled for their doorways, the men looked at each other uncertainly. They were conquerors, the Spain had lick the America, but the vanquished were still uncommonly handy with their guns.

It might be as well, perhaps, to stand inside one's own dooryard. Inside one's own dooryard one might not be so tempting a tar-

get. Therefore, from that less dangerous point of vantage they watched the L.X. outfit, with Ben Evans at its head, dash into the plaza and turn its horses toward its solitary occupants.

“Is she dead?” Ben’s horse went back on its haunches.

“Stunned, I think.”

“Who—how did it happen?”

“Bojarques ran her down.”

Ben’s mouth was set in a straight, hard line as he flashed a look at the others. Then he raised his reins and asked:

“Which way did he go?”

Bob directed him with a nod. That was all. The saddle leathers creaked as the horses responded to the spurs.

The Mexicans were returning, laughing boisterously, and Ignacio was a hero, wearing a self-conscious smirk. How neatly he had bowled her over! They bent in mirth over their saddle-horns.

What horsemanship he had displayed in striking the shoulder at the right angle! Ah, he was a devil when roused! They had better beware of him—Ignacio Bojarques! There

was proud blood in his veins. Ignacio Bojarques twirled his mustache and tossed his head. Pigs of Americans—bah!

What was that? The *caballeros* stopped on the instant. The pounding of hoofs, a cloud of dust—*Dios!* the *Americanos!* They recognized Ben Evans's big sorrel in the lead.

They curbed their horses in sudden panic, and the faces of the jaunty *caballeros* paled perceptibly. It was one thing to fight the *Americano* in the imagination and quite another to face him in reality, particularly when he was seeking the encounter with all his heart and soul. Indecision was in the Mexicans' attitudes in the momentary pause. Should they fight or run?

Perhaps the Americans desired to wreak their vengeance only upon Ignacio Bojarques. In that case surely it were not cowardice to remain neutral, since he alone was guilty! Happy inspiration! It was far less ignominious than to run; besides, one's back is a wide target.

They drew their horses to the roadside, huddling close to let the cowboys pass if they

would, and fight if they must. The only one among them who was in no doubt as to what he should do was Bojarques. With the first hoof-beat he promptly turned and ran.

The cowboys thundered by, passing the Mexicans grouped by the roadside without a glance, for they knew well enough whose horse kicked up the dust ahead.

Ignacio had no need to look over his shoulder to know that they were gaining. He rode far over his horse's neck, sick with fear. The hoof-beats behind him were only a little louder than the pounding of his heart.

When his winded horse began to stumble, he cast a terrified glance over his shoulder. The gap was closing fast, and his horse's breath was coming in sobs.

In front of him was a long stretch of ankle-deep sand. Once, twice, his horse's knees gave way. Its wind was almost gone!

In a frenzy of desperation he looked about for some way of escape other than the road. The torneo grew like a hedge on either side, dense, impassable, its thorns ready to tear his flesh to shreds if he tried to force it.

And then, *Jesus Maria*, if only he could

reach it; a trail branching to the river. In his insane fright he cared not where it went; he thought only of leaving the road, where quickly he must fall or surrender.

The horse was staggering when he reached it, but the trail was little used and harder than the road, which enabled it to recover somewhat. A hundred yards or so and the sullen Rio Grande spread before him. The trail ended on its sandy bank, and he could not go back.

The river was up, and running like a mill-race, yellow with sand and mud, and swirling in ominous eddies. Heavy rains and melting snows in the mountains to the North had raised it nearly level with its banks.

Uprooted trees and débris were rushing by, swirling and bobbing in the erratic current. It was thick, too, with sand, and from the torrent came a steady, dull, awesome roar.

For an instant it appalled Bojarques though he had forded it often at this crossing when the river was down. He looked at it, ashen with fear, while his horse stood at its edge with drooping head and spreading legs, its knees shaking violently beneath it.

A bullet sung by Bojarques's ear, and the river looked less formidable at the moment than his pursuers. He spurred the horse, which balked, bunching its feet in refusal upon the the very edge of the sandy bank.

The Mexican plied the quirt, and still the horse refused, while Bojarques in his fright screamed at it like a hysterical woman.

Without warning the bank caved beneath the horse's feet, and horse and rider sank with a splash to rise again in the swirling flood.

"Look at him—the crazy fool—he thinks he can swim it!" There was a certain compassion in the cowboys' faces, for the horse that was struggling gallantly in the yellow flood. It could as easily have breasted a cloudburst.

"If its head goes under once, they're gone; that water's more'n half sand."

The cowboys, looking on grimly, followed along the bank as the current swept horse and rider down.

The struggles of the already exhausted animal were growing weaker and, snorting, strangling, it turned its wild, beseeching eyes toward shore.

"Gosh! that hurts me clean through." Ben Evans began to uncoil his saddle rope.

The Mexican felt the horse was swimming lower, and realized that it could not keep up much longer with his weight upon its back, so he grasped its mane and slipped from the saddle.

"Look at him—he don't know straight up! Slidin' off on the upper side! That there Ignacio's a gone goslin'!"

Joe Brindell seemed to have stated facts, since, as the horse was swimming toward shore, the current swept Bojarques underneath him. They both went under, rose, and sank again, then the sand filled the Mexican's clothes, and he went down to rise no more. The horse righted itself, but its nostrils were barely above water.

"Be careful, Ben——"

But the cowboy was already out of hearing, riding hard to reach a bend where the current came close to the bank. There, with the noose swinging lightly to and fro, he waited.

If the horse recovered sufficiently to swim a little higher there was a chance. Ben waited

with his eyes fixed intently upon the oncoming horse, then the noose whirled through the air and dropped about its head. The noose closed, the rope grew taut, and the big sorrel braced its feet.

“Good boy, Ben; you shore can twist the manilla;” The L.X. outfit was hearty in its praise.

“I don’t mind the greaser,” Ben explained as he dragged the half-drowned animal up the bank, “but a good horse—well it would a set heavy on my conscience.”

CHAPTER XV

THE DREAM-BOOK

SPISER was in no gentle mood for days after his call upon Nan at Las Rubertas. The episode rankled like a thorn, and he still itched for satisfaction.

He had planted the seeds of unpleasantness and trouble for her before he left the village, but he wanted a swifter and surer revenge, and this would come through Ben Evans.

Urgent business took him to the farther end of the county, and the days which intervened before he could act seemed long indeed, but when he did return to the ranch he awaited the appearance of Ben with savage eagerness.

Ben, as was customary, gave a detailed report of the movements and work of the outfit during his absence, which included an account of his encounter with Kansas Ed in the arroyo.

Before his brief statement was done he

saw the hostility in Spiser's face and manner. He was not kept long in doubt as to its cause.

"You're gettin' damn' conscientious, ain't you?" he sneered.

Ben flushed.

"I ain't got no wings sproutin', but I don't aim to rustle from my friends."

"It seems to me you're a lookin' out a whole lot sharper for your friends' interests than you are for mine. And to be candid, Evans"—he eyed Ben insolently—"I think you're too much of a lady's man to be doin' much good for the L.X. outfit.

"And, as a matter of fact, I've come to the conclusion that you'd better get your time, take your blankets, and ride on. Kansas Ed is foreman of this outfit from now on."

Ben stood dazed with the unexpectedness of it, then with a show of spirit:

"All right, I'll go. The L.X. isn't the only cattle outfit in the State."

"The only one in this part of it that you'll be allowed to work for."

"We'll see about that." But the retort was bravado only, for Ben knew as well as Spiser the latter's power.

In the light of this interview there would seem to be little of the miraculous in the appearance of Ben Evans at the Longhorn *bosque* that same day, but so his arrival seemed to Mrs. Blakely, who cried triumphantly when she saw him:

"I knowed it! Just as shore as I'm standin' here I knowed he'd come! I *wished* him here, honey! All day long I been sayin' to myself, 'Come along, Ben Evans—make haste now.' Edie," Mrs. Blakely shifted her snuff-stick and said with solemn conviction, "I got a powerful strong will when I sets out to use it. If I weren't a good woman and the mother of a fambly, I'd be a reg'lar Cleopatra—destroyin' of men."

"Ma," Edith said impatiently, "you been sittin' in flour or something; your skirt looks awful. Do change it before Ben comes in."

With a deft twist the siren-that-might-have-been merely turned her apron around and wore it behind. Peering eagerly through the window—

"He's brought his bed, Edie, he aims to visit a spell! Don't you tell him nothin' about my givin' him absent treatments."

“Don’t worry, Ma,” Edith assured her dryly.

Ben, however, looked anything but the light-hearted wooer as he untied his roll of blankets from the saddle-horn and threw them inside the stockade.

“I’m a grub-liner now,” he announced grimly by way of greeting.

“You don’t have to ride no farther than here, honey-dumplin’.” Mrs. Blakely’s was the caressing tone of a new mother-in-law.

Ben looked slightly startled at the unusual appellation.

“What happened?” Edith guessed something of the truth from his moody eyes.

He replied curtly:

“Fired.”

“T-ts-ts-ts!” Mrs. Blakely wagged her head with proper sympathy, then cried gaily: “You won’t starve, my boy! There’s a slab of swine-buzzum in the pork-barrel, and we ain’t shuck the bottom of the meal-sack yet. Why, honey-dumplin’,”—she laid a motherly hand upon his arm, and Ben’s alarm increased perceptibly—“you can take yoah little stake and go in the cattle business with pap.”

Ben laughed with some acidity.

"Me? I couldn't go in business with a peanut-man. I haven't got the *dinero*. If I was to go off sudden, there'd be eighty dollars, one sorrel horse, a pair of blankets and a pet coyote to divide among my heirs."

"Laws, honey," declared Mrs. Blakely easily, "like as not pap will take you in for nothin'. If he won't,"—she smiled mysteriously—"I'll put my mind to it and will some good to you."

"Wish somebody'd will me something besides hard luck," Ben replied sourly. "All Las Rubertas has threatened to dry-gulch me for runnin' that greaser into the river."

"You'd ought to marry and settle down," said Mrs. Blakely pointedly, but a warning look from Edith stopped further suggestions along that line, so, suddenly mindful of the duties of a hostess, she commanded with dignity that daughter upon whom her glance happened to fall—"Carmencita, spat up a piller and lay down a little straw for Mr. Evans to spread his blankets. Clytie clean out the top burry drawer for Mr. Evans's gatherin's and git a cake of that perfumery soap. Undine,

I done tolle you fifty times not to take that comb away from the house. Look out there where you was combin' Rover and see if you dropped it in the yard. Make yoahself perfec'ly to home, Mr. Evans, for I aims to treat you like you was my own.'

Ben, without more ceremony, was temporarily installed as a member of the Blakely household, sleeping that night among innumerable Blakelys of both sexes, and at the table battling good-naturedly, but determinedly, for his portion of sour-dough bread and salt pork.

It was seldom that Mrs. Blakely's suggestions met with much favor from her husband, but in this instance her proposal as to a partnership between him and Ben did appeal to him because of its very obvious advantages.

Now that there was no longer any question as to who was depleting his herd, it meant constant vigilance and warfare, and of Ben's physical courage there could be but one opinion. The obstacle was Ben's entire lack of capital.

Mrs. Blakely furnished the solution of this problem also.

"Did you hear me scream and grab you in my sleep?"

Blakely, eating his breakfast in taciturn silence, admitted briefly that he recollects it quite well. The experience was not new.

"Last night I dreamed"—Blakely resigned himself to a period of suffering. For twenty years he had listened to his wife's dreams, and he had not grown to relish the recital more with the passing of time.

"Last night I dreamed"—reiterated Mrs. Blakely with zest—resting her elbows comfortably on the table and clasping both hands around her cup, "that rattlesnakes was swarmin' down on me from everywhars—big ones—little ones—all kinds of colors—and on the fight. I got a good holt on one back of the ears—"

"Ears, Ma?"

"I said ears—an' he couldn't git away, but I dassn't let go, an' all the rest was gittin' ready to strike—that's when I screamed out loud, Charlie—and then who do you 'spose come along and made 'em cl'ar out? Regina, take yoah fingers out of the sugar-bowl!"

“John L. Sullivan,” hazarded a youthful male Blakely humorously.

“That dude of Riley’s!” declared Mrs. Blakely impressively. “Mr. Ellison scattered my enemies right *and* left. Ain’t it plain as the hand-writin’ on the wall that he’s goin’ to help you-all out? Don’t you lose a minute, Ben. You ride over and borry enough off him to buy in with Pap. Luna, honey, chase that chicken out of the fryin’ pan while your up, and Undine retch under the shelf-paper and fetch Ma the dream-book.”

CHAPTER XVI

“WE’LL STEAL ‘EM BLIND!”

“TRULY, you are in earnest—you borrowed money from Bob to go in partnership with Mr. Blakely!”

Ben nodded somewhat sheepishly.

“Ben, how could you!” It was Nan who flushed with mortification.

“Why, not? What’s wrong about that?”

“Oh, can’t you see!” she cried miserably.

“You don’t see—that’s the worst of it to me—you don’t see! You cannot seem to understand—some things.”

“He’ll get it back,” he defended, mystified.

“But that is not the point at all; it is that you should ask this favor from him, of all persons.”

“He’s got plenty of it, hasn’t he?”

“Irrespective of that, which has nothing at all to do with it, to think that you would place yourself under obligations to a man to whom you have scarcely been civil, one to whom—if I must say it—you have been positively boorish.

"If only you had told me—I would have arranged the loan for you through my father sooner than this. What must Bob think of you! And he has not even hinted it to me."

"I can give it back," said Ben finally, in a kind of sullen contrition; not because he thought he had made a mistake, but because Nan, for these incomprehensible reasons, thought he had.

"No, it is done. You would as well keep it."

"Don't be mad at me!"

"I'm not 'mad'—I'm disappointed."

Ben, who had ridden to Las Rubertas prideful and elated over his ambitious venture, rode back to the Longhorn *bosque* crestfallen by Nan's disapproval, while Nan, in her sensitive pride, all but writhed as she tried to imagine Bob's opinion of Ben.

It could be nothing less than the mild contempt a man like Bob would feel for an inferior when that person acted as such. She was ashamed for Ben, and fearful that Bob would see her shame.

Nan knew well enough that Bob's seeming blindness to Ben's persistent sulkiness and

discourtesy was solely upon her account. His trained self-repression, his instinctive good manners and breeding, were in constant contrast to Ben's raw selfishness—the selfishness of a child who has not seen enough of the world to recognize the claims of others.

Yet Ben was the embodiment of the spirit of the cowboy, an incarnation of the sand and brawn and grit of the far West, and, as such he made a mighty appeal to the primitive in the girl, to her youth, imagination, and markedly romantic nature.

Spiser heard the news of the partnership with glee, and the trend of his thoughts may be gathered from his jubilant exclamation:

“Good! We'll steal 'em blind!”

Spiser wanted revenge with savage intensity, and in his new foreman he found a willing tool. Heretofore his wishes in regard to Blakely's cattle and Blakely's range had been conveyed in veiled terms, though sufficiently strong to make Kansas Ed understand that for every “stray” branded by him he would receive an extra five on his monthly check. But now, in his eagerness, Spiser no longer took this slight precaution.

"Brand every hoof you can get your rope on and run 'em off. We'll clean those fellers out, and we'll clean 'em quick!"

"I'm agreeable," and Kansas Ed looked it, "but you can't trust any of the outfit here; they wouldn't rustle from Ben. I'll have to have outside help."

"You can get that in Las Rubertas. There isn't a greaser in the place that isn't layin' for him. The Ospinos ought to be good *hombres* for this job."

"They're handy with a brandin'-iron all right," his foreman agreed; "I'll sound 'em."

The same day that Juan Ospino went into the employ of Spiser, Ben met him on the range, though the meeting was not of Ospino's choosing.

"What you huntin', Ospino?"

"Strays," was the answer, with a touch of malice.

"Strays!" Ben looked at him hard. "Go back to your boss, Ospino, and tell him that there are no strays on Blakely's range—that we ride it all the time, and," significantly, "we always keep our rifles where we can get at 'em easy."

And in due season Ospino reported the conversation, with the additional information that Blakely and Ben seemed everywhere at once. A discouraging state of affairs, he declared plaintively, for a hard-working thief who was paid on a percentage basis.

Kansas Ed corroborated the Mexican's story of their vigilance, and Spiser fumed. He had no notion of being thwarted and outwitted—it was demoralizing to his self-respect.

"There's more ways than one of killing a cat, Kansas."

"Cats is my speci-ality," Kansas grinned.

The reports of the annoyances, petty and otherwise, to which Nan was now subjected in Las Rubertas were some gratification to Spiser, but not enough to satisfy him.

He wanted to hit her harder, and to this end he was willing to take long chances.

CHAPTER XVII

ARRESTED

“HONEY-DUMPLIN’, you forgot yoah lunch!
You-all can’t ride all day ‘thout a snack.”

Ben made a wry face underneath his horse
as he reached for the *latigo*.

“I’ll get it,” he replied, but Edith ran from
the house with the parcel.

“I know you hate that horrible name, Ben,”
Edith said apologetically, “but she’s bound
that she’s goin’ to be a mother to you and I
can’t stop her.”

“Don’t try,” Ben smiled down upon her
as he straightened, “you’re so darned nice to
me, Edie, that I could even stand ‘Blessed
Angel’ and ‘Lovie’ for your sake.”

His words and smile made her glow.

Life had been so different, so much happier
since Ben came, even with the periods of
acute suffering when he rode to Las Rubertas.
But these occasions had been few, and his
stay brief after they learned the urgent neces-
sity of watchfulness upon the range.

Blakely had gone, and Ben was giving his *latigo* a final tug when two horsemen galloped briskly out of the *bosque* and drew rein at the stockade gate.

Ben recognized in them the sheriff of the county and a deputy.

“Howdy,” he nodded.

“Glad to see you’re saddled up.”

Ben’s eyes widened.

“What for?”

“Reckon I’ll have to ask you to take a little ride with me, Ben.”

Ben’s jaw dropped.

“Me?”

The sheriff fumbled in an inner pocket.

“This here paper’ll refresh your memory more’n likely.” He owed his nomination and election to Spiser and was therefore pleased to serve him.

Ben listened dumfounded while the sheriff read the warrant charging him with altering the L.X. brand on a two-year-old steer to Blakely’s and his own.

“It’s a lie!” flared Ben.

“You might as well wag along to Hope-

dale peaceable," advised the officer, "because we've come to git you."

Ben's face blanched. It was useless to protest his innocence or to resist. He knew he might as well go.

"Wait till I get my coat."

"Somebody's come to offer you a job, honey-dump——"

"A steady one," Ben answered laconically, "I'm arrested."

The sound which voiced Mrs. Blakely's surprise and grief resembled the siren whistle on a factory.

"Looks like we're breakin' up a nest of somethin'," observed the deputy when the little Blakelys took up the wail in different keys.

"Ben!" Edith laid her trembling hand upon his arm.

"Rustlin'," he exclaimed scornfully. "Spiser's ribbed it up on me."

"What can we do?" she asked, white to the lips.

He shook his head.

"I ain't got much show in a deal like this." He hesitated an instant: "I wish you'd ride

to Las Rubertas and tell 'em—tell *her*—I didn't do it. Good-by—good-by, Edie." He turned on his heel.

"I'm ready," he said curtly to the waiting officers, and sprang into the saddle.

So Ben was placed in the stone edifice in Hopedale known locally as the "cooler," and Fritz Poth contributed two soogans toward softening the slats in the bunk, while the citizens of Hopedale came singly and collectively to lighten the hours of his duress by conversation through the grating at the small window of the jail.

The formality of a preliminary hearing was dispensed with by Judge "Bill" Thompson, who owed his seat upon the bench largely to the fact that otherwise he would have become a town charge.

When the judge arrived at a certain stage of inebriety, midway between the mellowness of a few drinks and the total loss of his faculties, he acquired a preternatural loftiness of bearing which combined in his own bulky person all the dignity of the supreme court.

Fritz Poth had learned to a nicety the exact

moment at which to "flag" the judge on court days, and when the signal fell Hopedale was as dry as Death Valley so far as his honor was concerned.

The acquaintanceship of Judge Bill Thompson and Henry T. Spiser was of long standing, belonging to a period in the past of each to which neither referred.

As soon as Nan received the message Ben had sent, she ran white-faced and trembling to Riley's door. In the first shock of it she did not attempt to conceal her agitation and deep concern. The extent to which she was stirred by the news of Ben's arrest startled Bob. It convinced him more than anything else of the hopelessness of his cause—more even than her own words.

It was inconceivable to Bob that a girl like Nan could be seriously attached to Ben who, in spite of his many admirable qualities, lacked fineness. He had stubbornly refused to admit, in the face of the evidence to the contrary, that her interest in the cowboy was more than a caprice, an ephemeral fancy to which a girl of Nan's temperament might be subject, but at last he was convinced of its

sincerity. Mésalliances were occurring every day to confound society. Evidently this was to be one of them.

“Do you think it’s serious?” She studied his face anxiously.

“I don’t know, Nan.”

“But,” she demanded indignantly, “you don’t believe it?”

Bob shook his head.

“No; I don’t believe it. Ben is honest. It’s either a mistake or a conspiracy.”

“It’s dreadful—to be arrested—in jail! It sounds so disgraceful—and *common*. You read about people who commit arson and bigamy and murder, but somehow it doesn’t seem real to you—you would never meet such people in a thousand years—and then when you really know somebody that’s been arrested and put in jail why, it seems too terribly shocking for words, even when he’s innocent.”

“It’s not a pleasant thing for you to be mixed up in, Nan,” he answered gravely.

“You’ll do all you can for him, won’t you, Bob?” she pleaded.

“Yes,” he answered quietly, “I’ll do all I can for him—and for you. I don’t know how

much I can do. Conditions are peculiar out here and I've a notion that Justice is not a conspicuous figure in the local courts but you can count on me to the extent of my ability and resources."

"You've been so good to me, and patient," she said gratefully. "I don't know what I would do without you." Then colored at the pained look in his eyes and added vehemently to cover her confusion: "It's Spiser behind it all. I know it—I'm sure of it."

"More than likely," he agreed. "If it is, he may win, but before we're done he'll find victory more expensive than defeat, for we'll fight him through every court."

Sour Dough CHAPTER XVIII

“SOUR-DOUGH” TO THE RESCUE

“Looks to this court as though a city the size of what Hopedale is gettin’ to be ought to provide some place for the handin’ out of justice besides this here ex-palace of gilded vice.”

Judge Bill Thompson fixed a sternly disapproving eye upon an unmistakable feminine garment which still facetiously draped the chandelier, though its owner had long since departed along with the prosperity of Hopedale, which period dated from the slump in silver.

The judge had viewed the garment often without comment, but he felt that because of the ladies present at the opening of Ben Evans’s trial, he owed it to himself to make it known that the holding of court in such surroundings was without his sanction and not at all to his taste.

And, indeed, the setting was unique. Buxom damsels in purple tights blew foam

from mugs of beer of amazing size in the highly colored lithographs on the wall. A spangled fan hid an unsightly stove-pipe hole. The spiders had woven their webs between the yellowing curtains of coarse lace at the dingy, fly-specked windows, and the floor was littered with the tarnished gilt which had dropped in chunks from the gaudy molding.

The judge with deliberate movement took his seat in a faded plush chair upon the raised platform where the orchestra of the dance-hall had twanged its wild music.

A plank across two stout whisky-barrels, made a satisfactory desk and, what with a short ax-handle for a gavel, a pitcher and glass, together with the armful of imposing volumes which the judge laid upon it, the furnishings, though novel, seemed complete.

The judge sniffed as he sat down. He looked at the whisky-barrels—they had long been empty; then he reached for the pitcher and regarded its contents long and steadfastly before he applied its side to his lips.

“Ah-h-h!” It was not known in Hopedale that the judge derived such satisfaction from a cooling drink of water.

Rather as due the weight of his honorable office than from necessity, the judge settled a pair of nickel-plated spectacles upon his ruddy nose before he looked over the court-room and inquired blandly:

“Has this here gent got ary lawyer to defend him?”

The question was purely a formal one, since it was well known that Bob was to appear for Ben, and the crowd which filled the improvised benches was due largely to curiosity arising from this fact.

Bob rose from his seat on a box, near the judicial keg.

“I am counsel for the defendant, your honor.”

“Your honor!” The visible swelling of the judge’s chest made him pitch backward. He regarded Bob severely:

“Air you a Jim-crow, or a reg’lar lawyer?”

“I have been regularly admitted to the New York bar.”

The judge consulted a volume, pursed his lips, and considered.

“In which case,” he said finally, “I reckon

you air entitled to practise in this court with my permission."

Bob bowed deferentially: "I thank you."

The judge's hand executed a magnanimous flourish, and Fritz Poth pinched himself. Could that imposing personage, so severe and profound that the most audacious dared not address him familiarly, be the same that he had ejected from his hotel the night before for retiring with his boots on?

The judge raised the pitcher to his lips, removed the moisture with the back of his hand, and tapped sharply on the plank with the ax-handle:

"This here court will come to order—*pronto!*"

Silence fell.

"The jury will come to the front and set on this bench as I reads off their names. Old Man Hathaway!"

Ben leaned and whispered to Bob as a shifty-eyed person rose expectantly and shuffled forward.

"Challenge!" Bob called peremptorily.

Surprise was everywhere.

"Who you challengin', young feller?" in-

quired his honor, taken aback. "This is no time to start anything," he admonished.

"Surely," Bob replied suavely, "it is not necessary to remind the court that in objecting to a juror who is not satisfactory we are only exercising our rights?"

The judge stiffened.

"That may be law in New York, but 'taint here," replied his honor. "We make ourn to suit ourselves. Hathaway, slide along on that bench and make room for Johnny-Behind-the-Deuce!"

"He owes Spiser a five hundred-dollar poker debt," Ben whispered.

"Challenge!" Bob called sharply.

The gambler who bore a surprising resemblance to the Jack of Spades, hesitated.

"You hop into that seat," commanded the judge. "French Pete!"

"He's diggin' post-holes for Spiser," was the information Ben imparted.

"Challenge!"

"Look here!" the judge turned fiercely upon Bob—"you cut in again and I'll fine you for contempt of court."

Bob returned imperturbably: "I merely

want our objections noted, because, of course, we'll appeal this case if the verdict is against us."

The judge brought the ax-handle down with a resounding thwack.

"Order! That's pure sass, young man. No verdict of this here court was ever set aside yet. When a cattle-thief gets a sentence here he does time.

"Emanuel Armijo and Antonio Estrada, come forward and fill up the bench. Five jurors are enough on this case."

"Five jurors like those are enough on any case," Bob observed significantly, and another burst of laughter evidenced the spectators' appreciation of his meaning.

The judge reached for the pitcher and drank long and deep.

"Ah-h-h!" The rasping sound was beginning to bring an exchange of suspicious glances in the court-room.

"Gennelmen"—the judge swung the plush chair toward the self-conscious jury who looked uncommonly like a row of jailbirds—"this is a serious case what is up before us to-day, and one with which we have no man-

ner of sympathy. Cattle and horse thievin' must be stomped out in this community, and it's up to you to do the stompin'.

"The name of Las Verdas County has allus been kept pretty nigh as pure and unpolluted as its air, all except them seventeen rustlers what was swung over the bluff. And how has it been kept so?"

The five jailbirds looked at each other. The judge answered for them:

"By our untiring and ceaseless vigilance! In other words, to use the picturesque vernacular of the community in which we reside, by flyin' down and bitin' a piece out of a rustler whenever we see one. Shall we set back and let a rambunctious son of Texas come in here and give the fairest spot on God's green earth a black eye by makin' it onsafe for an honest man to own a hoof of stock? Prisoner, stand up and tell the court your name."

The "rambunctious" son of Texas unfolded his six feet of body and faced the judge.

"Ben Evans."

"Ben Evans." The judge's face assumed an expression of cunning. "Were that your name where you came from, or one what

pleased your fancy when you come into the territory?"

Ben answered curtly:

"It's my name anywhere."

"Whatcha gotta say, Mr. Evans, about this here rustlin' charge?" The judge's tongue sounded a little thick, and his eyes, as he fixed them upon Ben, watered weakly. "Air you guilty, young feller?"

"No; and what I have to say won't take long. I never run our brand on Spiser's cows, and he knows it. The rustlin's on the other side, and I can prove it. That's all I got to say, and you can believe it or not, as you blame please."

The prisoner sat down abruptly.

"Would it not be as well, your honor"—again the judge's spine stiffened—"a trifle more regular perhaps, to swear the jury and to request the plaintiff first to state his case?"

Bob's tone and manner was all deference as he arose to make the suggestion, but Nan saw his lips twitch ever so slightly at the corners.

The judge closed his eyes and considered

these points for a time, pursing his lips as he deliberated.

It might be as well to humor this stranger, he reasoned. It would appear more impartial; and it was really a small matter, after all, whether the prisoner defended himself before he knew exactly of what he was accused, or afterward. The judge's hand sought the pitcher and, though his eyes were still closed, he found the handle with unerring instinct.

"Ah-h-h! Poth, do you think you can jump up a Bible handy?"

"They *was* one here"—Poth raised the dust of many months as he fumbled on a shelf—"but a doggone pack-rat got away with most of it. I know where they's a mail-order store's catalogue—a sheep-herder's Bible is better than nothin', jedge. Here's what's left of it!" Poth held up the chewed remnants, adding cynically: "Them rats can swaller more than I can."

"'Tain't becomin', Mr. Poth," said the judge reprovingly, "in a gent as sells as poor whisky as you do to cast slurs at the Gospel.

Will the Hon. 'Hank' T. Spiser kindly step forward and swear himself?"

Spiser, who had been leaning against the wall in the rear of the room, extracting vast satisfaction from Ben's predicament, Nan's pale face and anxious eyes, now pushed his way to the front and "swore himself" upon the tattered Bible.

"This fellow," he nodded contemptuously toward Ben, "was foreman for me for over a year, and gave fair satisfaction until a certain party"—his face was ugly with a sneer—"came into the country, when he began to neglect his work, and I fired him. He was sore, and threatened to get even.

"He went into partnership with a 'nester' down in the Longhorn *bosque*, and their herd didn't grow fast enough to suit 'em. My foreman saw some suspicious-looking brands in their bunch. I hired a couple of Mexicans to trail 'em, and he found it no great job to come up on this fellow Evans burning a brand. I had him arrested, and that's all there is to it."

He turned to leave the stand.

Bob stopped him with a quick gesture.

"Just a moment, if you please. Not quite all there is to it, Mr. Spiser. If you will try, you may recall the fact that at the time you discharged Evans he reported having come upon your present foreman in the act of burning a brand on one of Blakely's cows."

"He did not report it," returned Spiser coolly.

Bob's restraining hand upon Ben's arm kept him in his seat.

"No?" Bob's tone was polite inquiry. "But if I should tell you that he did see your present foreman in the act of burning a brand, that I also was a witness, you would, of course, discharge him?"

Spiser replied with heat:

"That's *my* business."

"What—rustling?" And again the court-room snickered at Bob's audacity.

"I appeal to the court." Spiser turned furiously upon his honor. "I didn't come up here to be insulted!"

"Tha'sh right!" The judge endeavored to rap for order, but missed the plank and brought the ax-handle down smartly upon his knee-cap. "Ouch! Tha'sh right! Can't no

fresh dude come into this country and insult ol' fr'en' of mine—ol', ol' fr'en'.' The judge was almost tearful.

“That will do for the present, Mr. Spiser.” Bob received a look which left him in no doubt as to Spiser’s feeling toward him as that person left the stand. “The prosecution has other witnesses, I presume?”

“Wher’sh that saddle-colored gent what seen this?” The judge’s eyes roved over the court-room, and Juan Ospino stood up with a noticeable absence of alacrity.

Bob was an unexpected factor in the case, and sending Ben Evans to the penitentiary did not seem so simple as it had when his story was outlined for him by Spiser.

He knew the jury, which was of Spiser’s choosing, and the judge were palpable tools, but there were the spectators to reckon with, and there was something very disconcerting in the directness of this suave young man. Ospino was visibly agitated as he swore to tell the truth and gave the court his name.

“It ees not much that I haf to say,” he began in a high and tremulous voice. “Señor Spiser lose his cows, and he hire me to watch

Ben Evans. I have not many days to wait. Then I see him run a cow into the arroyo. I tie my horse and crawl up where I can look. He haf the cow roped and throwed. It haf the L.X. brand, and I stay till I see him burn the brand with a piece of wire. Then I hurry away—queeick!"

"Why didn't you stop him, Ospino?"

The Mexican shrugged his shoulder.

"I am not prepare to die, señor."

"I can believe that," Bob observed.

"And you are sure—very, very sure that you saw the L.X. brand?"

"Ver', ver' sure," replied the Mexican positively.

"How far off were you, Ospino?"

Instinctively the Mexican's eyes sought Spiser's and that person gave him a warning look.

"I t'ink one hundred yard, maybe."

"Did you ever work with a surveying party?"

The casual question brought a startled look into the Mexican's eyes, and again they sought the rear of the room as though for advice. He stammered finally:

"I n-not remember."

"That will do"—the Mexican looked his relief—"but don't go. Sit there. I'll need you again. Mr. McCaffrey."

There was a buzz of surprise when the spectators saw Mr. McCaffrey's red head moving like a flambeau from the back of the room to the stand. Not so much surprise because he was an unexpected witness as because he answered to another name than "Sour-Dough."

"You know this witness, Ospino?" Bob asked, after Mr. McCaffrey had been sworn with much solemnity.

"Better nor a brother," replied Mr. McCaffrey. "Bunked with him for six weeks when we worked with the same survey outfit t'other side of Rincon."

"Why did he leave the surveying party?"

"Canned," Mr. McCaffrey answered briefly.

"Why?"

"Because he et prunes out'n the dish with his fingers every time 'twere passed, and he's near-sighted. Can't see much furderer than

the end of his nose. The boss said he were a nuisance."

"That will do, Mr. McCaffrey."

"Ospino!"

The Mexican stood up with a sickly smile.

"Your honor?" Bob turned to the judge. His honor had slipped into dreamland. He was not only asleep, but a low gurgle proclaimed a coming snore.

Fritz Poth stepped forward and looked into the pitcher. It was empty, but there was no mistaking the lingering odor.

"Who done this?" he demanded.

"Never mind him," urged the citizens of Hopedale, now aroused. "He don't cut any figger, anyhow. We want to know who's lying in this here case."

"It's a very easy matter to find out," Bob replied. "Mr. McCaffrey, if you will be good enough to go to the opposite side of the street and hold up some object we can very quickly test this witness's eyesight."

Spectators, jury, prisoner—all save the slumbering law—piled out unceremoniously to the sidewalk. Spiser among them, his face like a thundercloud. Mr. McCaffrey walked

briskly across the street and held up his dollar watch.

The perspiration stood out on the Mexican's forehead, and he screwed his face in a grimace of distress as he strained his eyes to distinguish the object in McCaffrey's hand.

"Don't be bashful, pardner," encouraged the crowd; "don't be scart of your voice! Speak right out!"

But Ospino was "scart" of other things than his voice, for he was unable to more than dimly see McCaffrey, much less his watch.

In desperation he blurted out at random:
"A gun!"

The spectators' derisive hoots told him of his failure.

"Guess again, greaser! Air you plumb sure that cow you saw wer'n't a burro?"

The spectators were with Bob now to a man, and Nan thought he never had looked more the thoroughbred than when upon their return to the court-room he stood up to address the jury.

The element in the court-room had the natives innate prejudice against an Eastern

“dude,” and Bob, in his well-fitting clothes, carefully groomed, typified in his appearance all that the word conveyed to their minds. But, unconsciously in his brief stay he had absorbed something of the vigor and vim of the West, or perhaps it was only that he gave freer rein to a naturally forceful personality.

At any rate, as he talked to the jury and to the spectators, the latter, in fact, being the ones to whom he directed his plea, he was as blunt, as vigorous, as unconventional as one of themselves, and the barrier of prejudice melted between them.

The jurors felt it, and squirmed uneasily in their seats as their eyes roved from Spiser’s black countenance to the approving faces of the spectators. Spiser, for reasons best known to themselves, held each and every one of them in his unscrupulous grip, yet public opinion in Hopedale when thoroughly aroused was something to be reckoned with.

“Men of the jury,” said Bob in conclusion, “it is for you to say whether Ben Evans is to go through life branded as a thief by a self-confessed liar and his no less culpable employer, or whether he is to walk out of the

court-room cleared of this groundless and heinous charge!"

"Heinous charge!" The words and ensuing applause reached through the judge's slumbers to his befogged brain.

He sat up with a snort and rapped for order, inadvertently shoving one of his volumes to the floor. Bob picked it up and read: "Year-book of the Department of Agriculture, 1892."

"Heinous charge," reiterated the judge, "and hangin'sh too good for him!"

Fritz Poth stepped forward once more and slipped his hand under his honor's arm.

"Your bed's made up for you, Bill, and you'd better git to it. Young feller," he addressed Bob, "reckon I voice the sentiments of this here community when I says turn the prisoner loose!"

A yell of approval all but lifted the roof.

"Congratulations, Bob," Nan smiled radiantly as she extended her hand, "upon winning your first case."

CHAPTER XIX

IN THE CANON

Bob now basked in the genial warmth of Hopedale's approval. Its citizens boasted of his triumph over Spiser in no uncertain terms to those who had not been present, and tacitly agreed to overlook the fact that he changed his linen with incredible frequency and manicured his nails.

Edith was staying a few days as Nan's guest, and Ben lingered in Hopedale, though there was every reason why he should have returned to the ranch immediately after the trial.

No intelligent woman is pleased when a man neglects his work for her. Nothing so fills her with misgivings. Nan was an intelligent woman, and more, for she inherited something of her father's business acumen and instincts.

It disturbed her, irritated her, to see him linger when his vital interests were at stake—shamed her, too, because she knew that Bob

was as well aware of the fact as she was that Ben should have been at the ranch.

With all Bob's apparent lack of earnestness, his careless cynicism, Nan felt that he never would have shown such weakness of character where their future was concerned.

In fact, Bob was a constant surprise to her, and in no way more than in the ease with which he adapted himself to the crude life and surroundings. She enjoyed his companionship more than ever before. There was a completeness about it which was lacking in her association with Ben, because of his entire understanding of her point of view.

His wit was subtle, his reasoning logical—all the advantages of a trained over an untrained mind stood out in glaring contrast.

Bob was arranging with a guide to take him into the mountains and purposely saw little of Nan. He felt as though the ache in his heart were passing endurance, and he wanted to get away. There was no need to thrust his wretchedness in upon Nan's happiness. Thanks to his trained self-repression he was sure she only dimly realized how much he cared, how deeply he was hurt. He was con-

stantly on his guard when with her lest he betray himself by some look or word. She had made her choice, and the only thing which now remained for him to do was to quietly withdraw and take his medicine like a man.

Nan was quick to feel the change in him, the subtle difference left her with a feeling of helplessness, as though some important support had been taken away. She had not known how much she depended upon him until he left her to decide everything entirely for herself. She had taken his devotion and constant attention as a matter of course and his withdrawal became the troubled under-current of her thoughts.

Then, too, an imperative telegram came saying that her "furlough" had expired and she must return without delay. Altogether she was in no enviable frame of mind in spite of the success of the trial.

The stage for the railroad terminus left the next day but one, and in the interim Nan knew she must make up her bewildered mind as to what she was going to do. Edith, too, felt she could stay no longer, and it was her suggestion that Nan and Bob should travel

a part of the way to the Longhorn *bosque* with Ben and herself the day following the receipt of Nan's telegram.

Since Edith was determined to go, Ben could do little else than accompany her on the long ride.

This ride meant as much to Edith as to Nan, for the *bosque* girl had found her opportunity to slip the ashes of the heart of the wild dove in the pocket of Ben's chaps, and if there was any virtue in her mother's love-charm surely she must know it before the ride was done. Nan had promised to give Ben her final answer to the one great question which he had asked her again in embarrassed eagerness.

It was not a particularly gay party that made ready to start in front of the hotel the next morning, though Bob did his best and Nan made an effort to be her vivacious self. But the clouds sagged heavy and blue over the mountains, the air was curiously still and oppressive, and altogether the occasion for any of them was not conducive to high spirits.

"You're liable to get wet around the edges," Fritz Poth said in friendly warning,

and tied his "slicker" on the back of Nan's saddle.

"We'll not be able to go much beyond the box cañon, I fancy." Bob looked anxiously at the lowering clouds. He still watched them as they alternately galloped and walked over the good and bad stretches in the road which lay between them and the great crack in the low, spreading mountain which some convulsion of nature had rent asunder.

For a distance of three-quarters of a mile the road led through this gash in the mountain, the walls of which rose in places nearly sheer for three hundred feet. The same mountain-stream which furnished Hopedale with water flowed through the bottom of the cañon, and the wagon-road was the bed of the shallow creek.

"They are sure wicked-lookin' clouds back there." Ben glanced casually over his shoulder.

"See how they sag!" Nan commented. "They look like big, dark-blue army blankets filled with water."

Bob was uneasy; he felt that they should return, but hesitated to suggest it because of

Nan's and Ben's absorption in each other's conversation. He and Edith had dropped behind, making spasmodic efforts to talk, but without heart.

They had ridden for an hour or more before they entered the cool gloom which lay between the two great walls, and had splashed for some distance through the rocky creek-bed, when suddenly the horses pricked their ears, and Nan's wheeled, stretching its neck as though to listen.

"How strange!" she exclaimed. "Whoa!" Ben jerked his horse sharply.

"What's the matter with you!"

"Something's wrong!" declared Edith. "My horse never acts like this. Steady, now!"

Nan's spirited horse tried to bolt. It took all her strength to pull him down.

"They act like they smelled bear or some varmint." Mystified, Ben threw back his head and searched the perpendicular rocks above them. His horse was quivering in every muscle.

Simultaneously the horses reared and plunged, their nostrils distended, their ears

stiffly erect as though they heard or smelled some terrifying, unseen thing. Their excitement turned to frenzy as they fought for their heads.

"There's some good reason for this." Bob's horse was all but unmanageable.

"It gets me." Ben still searched the cañon walls with his eyes.

Then Edith's raw-boned cayuse squealed.

"Good God!" Ben's voice made his listeners blood run cold.

A sullen, unceasing roar reached their ears. Faint it was, but growing louder even in the second that they listened.

"It's water! A cloudburst! For God's sake, give 'em the spurs—it's comin' down the cañon!" Ben struck Nan's horse with his rein's end. "You've got to ride for your life, girl!" he said in a tense voice.

Bob looked despairingly at the towering cliffs. There was no foothold there. To reach the end of the cañon seemed their only chance.

The horses needed neither rein's end nor spur. They shook their heads free and ran like Derby winners gone stark mad with fear.

The water rained in showers from the splash of their flying feet. Yet the roar of the cloud-burst, the indescribable din of many waters piled in one, was growing louder with every heart-beat.

"We've got to do better!" yelled Ben. "Give 'em all the quirt!" He leaned and lashed Nan's horse.

"I can't; my horse is nearly played out!" Edith's despairing cry rose shrill.

The constant jumping of rocks and drift-wood, together with the terrific pace, was beginning to tell on all the horses, but most of all on Edith's worn-out cow-pony.

He dropped behind.

Bob slackened his horse's pace and fell from it in his haste, but clung to the reins.

"Get off! Quick!"

She shook her head, but he caught the bridle when she would have passed and pulled her from the saddle. He threw her, rather than helped her, into his own.

"Don't spare him—he can make it!" He struck the quivering horse from behind and it was off with a leap.

The roar of the torrent reverberating in

the long, empty cañon was now deafening. The boom of it was so close that Nan glanced over her shoulder and the sight behind her all but stopped the beating of her heart.

Under her horse's racing feet an inch or two of water flowed placidly; a hundred yards from his heels a wall of water was rushing upon them like some monstrous thing of life bent on their destruction!

The perpendicular face of it was as even as though sliced with a giant cleaver, and behind, uprooted trees, fence-rails and gates, the roof of a house, a bridge, drowned cattle, pitched and rolled in the yellow flood!

Nan grew limp and sick, for, in the swift glance over her shoulder she missed Bob, and then she saw the horse which Edith rode now running nearly even with her own!

A turn brought the end of the cañon in sight. Outside, bawling cattle with their heads and tails in air were running aimlessly from the threatening danger.

Ten seconds! Five seconds! Could they make it?

The yellow wall was all but upon them. Nan, fainting, swayed in the saddle.

“Nan! Hang on! Just one jump more!”
Ben’s imploring cry was lost in the roar of
the flood.

Then it burst from the confining walls of
the cañon with a kind of sullen *boom! boom!*
and spread into a wide, swirling river as the
three horses plunged, gasping, up the nearest
knoll.

CHAPTER XX

NAN'S "AFFINITY"

THE Hon. "Hank" T. Spiser, who had been absent from Hopedale since the trial, drove into town in time to see a figure that strongly resembled his cook emerging from the general merchandise store with his arms piled high with packages, while the greater portion of the leisure class of Hopedale followed in his wake.

Two L.X. pack-horses and a saddle-horse stood at the hitching-post in front of the store.

Spiser stopped his team and demanded sharply:

"What you doin' in town, Clarence?"

"Shoppin'," replied that person easily.

"Shoppin'! What you got in that pack?"

"Socks."

"What you got in that pack?"

"Socks."

Spiser felt in his pocket for his time-book.

"I'll write you a check and you just stay in town and wear them socks out."

"Thanks—much obliged—but I promised the boys I'd git back; and while I think of it, Spiser, I wish you wouldn't smoke them horses up like that. I hate to see a good team abused."

Mr. Spiser frankly stared.

Was his cook as locoed as a sheep-herder, or was he merely looking for trouble? As a precaution, Spiser took the whip from its socket and held the butt of it in one hand, while, with an indelible pencil, he filled out a check with the other.

"Thanks—much obliged." Clarence read the check carefully. "Now, while you're writin', jest look up what's comin' to you from the company, and make out one to yourself."

Again Spiser stared.

"What ails you?" he replied with a tolerant air. "Been sleepin' in the moonlight?"

The cook shook his head.

"I'm an heiress—me man."

"You're what?"

"M'uncle's dead."

"Oh, crazy with grief."

"Joy," corrected Clarence. "And, Spiser,

when you speak to me in public like this, I wish you wouldn't be so familiar. Just take the time and call me Mister—Mister Strunk."

The highly entertained listeners saw Spiser's jaw drop.

"Not—the Los Angeles Strunk?"

Clarence nodded.

"*The same.* Named for my lovin' Uncle Clarence who showed his affection by kickin' me out so's I'd learn what a dollar is worth. I own seventy-five per cent. of the stock in the L. X. Cattle Company and I don't mind sayin' that it's worth all I'm gettin' to go through life tagged 'Clarence.' However, me man, they could 'a' added on 'Percy' and 'Claude' if it'd give me the privilege of tyin' a tin-can onto you when I come into my rights. Spiser, you're *bounced*. Git out o' that buggy and gimme the whip! Ridin' horseback is too fatiguin'."

It was true enough, and Clarence Strunk had the necessary papers to prove it, which same he produced with alacrity for Spiser's inspection.

"They're air-tight and water-proof!" declared Mr. Strunk. "And furthermore," he

went on, "while I'm no hand to toot my own horn it looks to me like you ought to have seen that I was somebody out of the ordinary. I got a easy, careless way about me that shows pedigree and then these long, taperin' fingers and p'inted ears—— Say, git down out that buggy, it makes me mad to look at you!"

So it came about that Clarence Strunk, leading a saddle-horse and two pack-horses behind a four-wheeled vehicle, attempted to drive through the cañon after the cloudburst had passed, just a little bit sooner than would a person who had not been in Hopedale drinking heartily to his own health.

The water, though falling rapidly, was still running swift and nearly belly-deep when Mr. Clarence Strunk urged his horses into the stream.

In spite of the fact that the water was swishing around his ankles, and he had several narrow escapes from upset, he was half-way through the cañon and congratulating himself upon overcoming the cowardly impulse to wait until the creek subsided a little more, when he heard a faint hail.

He looked ahead of him, behind him, and straight up. No one was in sight.

He smacked his ears smartly in case something had gone amiss inside his head.

“Hello!”

Mr. Strunk felt suddenly lonesome in the gloom of the cañon and shivered. The thought came that perhaps his uncle was going to haunt him to see how he spent his money.

“Hello!”

The voice was louder and sounded less as though it came from the grave.

Then something ahead moved on the apparently perpendicular cañon wall.

“Gee-e-e whiz!” Clarence Strunk’s eyes bulged.

The horses splashed a little faster toward a clinging figure.

“My grip’s nearly gone!” Bob smiled faintly, but his face was white with the strain as he spread like a star-fish on the cañon wall, the ball of one foot resting on a slight projection, the fingers of one hand thrust in a crevice, and the other hand gripping a tiny

shrub that somehow had spread its roots in a bit of shallow, uncertain soil.

"I can't find the foothold below and I dare not let go to look."

Clarence Strunk was quite sober now, but even with his wits about him it was no safe or easy task to reach the place to which Bob had climbed in the one desperate chance he had seen to save his life.

"The swiftness of it made me dizzy," said Bob, when he was down and seated in the buckboard. "The sprawling limbs of a tree nearly raked me off once, and the noise"—he shuddered—"the roar, the grinding together of boulders rolling like pebbles; and I saw the saddle-horse go by with his legs up! It made me nervous."

"It musta," agreed Clarence. He added reminiscently: "I mind how I felt when a Swede chased me with a knife because he said I hadn't put no lemon in the lemon pie. To be cut off in the flower of your youth thataway, with a jackknife or a cloudburst or a chunk of lead—it's hidj'ous. Do you think the rest of them made it?"

"I think so. Listen!"

“That’s them!”

They heard the splashing of horses, and then Nan and Edith and Ben came around a jutting point. The riders stopped as though they doubted their own eyes, for they, too, had seen Edith’s cow-pony tumbling in the flood.

Nan, who had been leaning over the saddle-horn, straightened herself.

“Bob!” she cried, but he was too far away to hear, nor did he see her white, grief-stricken face before the color returned.

They were still all but speechless with astonishment when they met, but Mr. Strunk said breezily: “Lemme make you acquainted with the human fly.”

They laughed, all of them, a little hysterically.

“I didn’t think you had a chance on earth,” said Ben.

“I hadn’t but one,” Bob replied. “And now if I can hire Spiser’s horse here”—he looked at the saddle-horse behind the buck-board.

“Spiser’s horse? Clarence Strunk’s horse—Clarence Strunk’s buggy—Clarence

Strunk's pack-horse loaded with thirty dozen pairs of socks and fourteen cooed shirts! Clarence Strunk, boss of the L.X. outfit."

Mr. Strunk's starched bosom crackled as he smote his chest. "That's me! M'uncle's dead."

They separated in the cañon, Ben and Edith to go on their way, and Nan and Bob to return to Hopedale.

"Good-by, Ben." Bob heard the catch in Nan's voice, and he turned his horse from their leave-taking, but not too soon to see Ben take her hand in both of his and raise it to his lips.

They rode in silence the greater part of the way to Hopedale, Bob absorbed in thought and Nan tongue-tied with a new feeling of shyness. Below the town they stopped to let their horses drink, and to walk a bit themselves.

"Our last ride together, Nan," said Bob, staring absently at the stream which had not yet cleared itself.

Nan felt her heart jump, and her voice was startled when she repeated:

“Our last!”

“I am going into the hills with French Pete to-morrow,” he said quietly. “I know that you have decided as to your future, and I have no place in your plans. At last I have come to see that I have no chance of winning your love, and I mean never to bother you with it again.

“You will forgive me, Nan, won’t you, if I have annoyed you with my persistence? But it was hard—so very hard to give you up. I could not help it; I loved you so! I wanted you so! And as long as I thought there was no one else the hope would persist that some day you might come to care for me in the way that I wanted you to care. There is some one else now and you do not need me any more, so I will go. God bless you, Nan, and I hope you will be happy!”

“Bob!” She laid her hand upon his arm.

“Don’t pity me, Nan. This disappointment has come to many a better man than I am. You’ve been frank and fair with me. I bear you no resentment. There is no bitterness toward you in my heart—nothing but love.”

"Don't go!"

"But can't you see, Nan, it—hurts me so to be near you now loving you as I do!"

"But you're wrong!" she cried passionately. "I was wrong! I've loved you all the time, and I didn't know it until I felt you drawing away from me. If I hadn't been sure before, I was sure when I thought you had gone forever. Ben knows, too. I was dreadful—I was beside myself almost because he dared be alive, so brutally safe and sound when you were dead!"

"Oh, Nan!" he cried, bewildered. "You are not mistaken!"

She shook her head, crying vehemently:

"No, no, no! I'm not mistaken. You play a mighty part in my happiness. You are all of it!"

"But, Ben! I don't understand—"

"Can't you see? It is through Ben that I really have found you. If it had not been for him, perhaps I should not have appreciated your loyalty, your genuine unselfishness, until it was too late. Ben is fine in many ways, and I thought I was in love with him because I am in love with the life

which he typifies. I was to have given Ben my answer to-day, and I could not make up my mind. I told him back there in the cañon when we said good-by, but he already knew.

“‘It’s all right, Nan,’ he said. ‘I think a heap of you, and I reckon I always will, but I might ‘a’ knowed that a range cayuse and a blooded horse don’t make any kind of a team. I don’t blame you,’ he said, ‘and you mustn’t blame yourself, for you’ve been on the square with me right along. I’m better for having known you. It’s made me see a whole lot of things different, and maybe some day I can send you word that the cowpuncher you used to know is *somebody* out here in the cactus and sage-brush!’”

“Nan!” Bob gathered her in his arms. “I can’t believe my good luck yet!”

“You won’t,” said Nan, “until you kiss me.”

They were married in the whitewashed church in Hopedale. Nan insisted.

“The family will expect something of me,” she declared, “for the moon is full, and it’s

the last really good chance I'll ever have to shock them."

Mrs. Gallagher, Fritz Poth, Mr. McCaffrey, were conspicuous among the witnesses. And Clarence Strunk was there, having come to town to complete arrangements for the sale and transfer of his stock in the L.X. Cattle Company to Bob.

"The house," said Bob to Ben, who was offered the management, "is much more comfortable than the house in the Longhorn *bosque*, and Edie, you know"—with his quiet smile—"is a good girl."

The telegram which Nan wrote gleefully, aged the family by years. It read:

"Will be home a week from to-day with my
affinity.
NAN."

THE END

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